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Examining individual differences in Second  
Language Learning

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## **Abstract**

Each individual has a different way of learning a language. In this project, among the numerous individual differences that exist, eight factors are analysed to explore their influence on second language learning, focusing on age, aptitude, autonomy, emotions, language strategies, language style, motivation, and personality. This is followed by a practical part that consists of a questionnaire to see the perspectives students from the English Degree at Rovira i Virgili University have about their learning. As for the results, students usually agree with previous studies presented throughout this project, and some highlights from the results are the lack of anxiety when speaking in English, and the important role of motivation found in students.

**Keywords:** individual differences, Second Language Learning, language learning factors.

## **Glossary**

**SLL:** Second Language Learning (SLL) refers to the process and investigation of how people acquire a second language in contrast to their native language (Rieder-Bünemann, 2012).. In this project, the term Second Language Learning does not imply only a second language, it can also be a third or fourth language, depending on the individual.

**Language learning:** Process of how people acquire a language. In this project the term language learning is used when referring to a student learning a language that is not their native language.

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## **1. Introduction**

The motivation for this project is to explore some individual differences that students have when learning a language. While some students learn quickly, others face more difficulties that have to do with the individual differences that each individual presents. Throughout the years, several studies have researched different individual factors to see why some learners are more successful than others.

In this project, there is a literature review of eight individual differences that learners have when learning. Individual differences include age, aptitude, autonomy, emotions, language strategies, language style, motivation, and personality. After explaining these factors, a practical part contrasts the information with what students think about their learning. This practical part is formed by a questionnaire with fourteen questions regarding the eight individual differences explained in the theoretical background and some general questions to see the overview of students. With the results obtained, the data is analyzed, followed by the discussion, leading to the conclusion.

## **2. Literature review: Individual Factors in Second Language Learning**

During this project, the term Second Language Learning (SLL) will describe language learners. Using this term does not necessarily imply that learners are learning a second language; it could also be a third or a fourth language. In addition, each individual is different, and it is challenging to differentiate how many languages a learner already knows. For this reason, during this project, the term SLL will be used indistinctively.

When learning a second language, there are some factors that make each learner different (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020). Ellis (2004, p. 529) states that “there are a number of key

factors that figure repeatedly” such as learning aptitude, motivation, personality, learning strategies, or learning beliefs.

There are multiple research papers about individual differences in second language learning. This project's chosen factors are age, aptitude, autonomy, emotions, learning strategies, learning style, motivation, and personality. These individual differences were chosen based on the amount of research they have and their impact on each individual.

## **2.1. Age**

There is nothing that learners can do to change their age, which is why, according to Griffiths and Soruç (2020), age is less flexible of all the learner factors. It is believed that *the younger, the better* when learning a second language. However, after analysing different studies, Griffiths and Soruç (2020) conclude that the younger for learning a second language does not imply the better. Griffiths and Soruç (2020) also make a distinction between young and adolescents since “major physiological changes (which) take place dynamically over this period, and (which) inevitably impact learners’ psychological reactions, including their response to contextual characteristics” (p. 15), and therefore they have more variables that affect their way of learning such as motivation, aptitude, autonomy, style, cognitive development, affect and social influences (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020). Adult learners have been related to a negative outcome when it comes to learning a second language, having some studies such as Schumann (1975) or Schmidt (1983) that, show the negative outcome of the adult when learning a second language (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020). However, there is “growing evidence that some learners who start learning as adults can achieve a native-like competence” (Ellis, 2008, p. 31 as cited in Griffiths & Soruç, 2020 ), and there are studies that show positive

outcomes of the adult learning such as Muñoz and Singleton (2007) or Reichle (2010) (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020).

According to Griffiths and Soruç (2020), the age-related differences in second language learning may have possible explanations that include neurological maturation (a critical period where language is acquired or learnt quickly and easily), psycho-affective factors (explain why young learners are usually more successful than adults learners due to variables of the individual), and social and ecological context (where explains that adult learners tend to maintain their identity whereas young learners tend to identify themselves with a group).

## **2.2. Aptitude**

Defining the factor of aptitude has been challenging (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020). However, the definition of this term is provided by Carroll (1981), who states that aptitude is “an individual’s initial state of readiness and capacity for learning a foreign language, and probable facility in doing so given the presence of motivation and opportunity” (p. 86). The term “talent” is also used in the definition of aptitude, and as an example, we have Chalmers et al. (2021), who state that aptitude “refers to a “talent” for language learning” (p. 3). Researchers have tried to measure and test the factor of aptitude, and tests such as the *Modern Language Aptitude Test* designed by Carroll and Sapon (1959) have foreseen the achievement of the learning of a second language for more than 60 years (Chalmers et al., 2021). In Carroll and Sapon’s (1959) MLAT, four aspects of language aptitude were tested: phonemic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, inductive learning ability, and rote learning ability. However, it is still unclear whether aptitude tests measure innate ability or if they measure other factors such as working memory, neurolinguistic evidence, aptitude complex, intelligence, or malleability (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020).

### **2.3. Autonomy**

The definition of this term is usually the one given by Henri Holec, who defines autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec, 1981, as cited in Csizér, Albert & Piniel 2021). Making decisions about one’s own learning is a dynamic process that usually includes other factors such as motivation, leading learners to take action in their own learning, and metacognition, providing awareness about their learning (Gao & Zhang, 2011; Unishoda, 2011). In addition, some studies, such as the one made by Cotterall, state that being autonomous is related to being proficient in second language learning (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020).

Nowadays, technology plays a crucial role in autonomy when speaking of second language learning. Anyone can have access to technology devices and use different online platforms and resources, with the advantage that learners decide what, when, where, and how they learn. However, the use of technology in learners' autonomy is strongly related to motivation, and self-discipline, making some learners have more autonomy than others. (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020).

### **2.4. Emotions**

Emotions play an essential role in second language learning. The definition that Keltner et al. give for emotions is “multifaceted responses to events that we see as challenges or opportunities in our inner or outer world, events that are important to our goals” (Keltner et al. as cited in Csizér et al. 2021). There are several aspects of emotions in language learning. Among the studies of emotion, anxiety is the most researched one and is defined by Oxford (1999) as “the fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in a second or foreign language” (p. 59). Numerous studies have researched the role that anxiety plays in language learning, and they have consistently shown that it has

a negative relation with the success of learning a second language (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020). However, Scovel (1978) states that anxiety can be divided into debilitating for language learning, which is a negative effect, or facilitating for language learning, which is beneficial to the students because they “achieve a higher level that they might have achieved”. In other words, Scovel (1978) sees anxiety as a negative but also a positive emotion.

Even though anxiety is the most researched emotion and is generally categorised as negative, some emotions are considered positive but have received less attention (Rahimi & Bigdeli, 2014). Therefore, in order to overcome negative emotions, language learners must be encouraged to feel positive emotions with the help of teachers and the general environment of the learner (Rahimi & Bigdeli, 2014).

## **2.5. Learning Strategies**

There are several definitions for the concept of learning strategies. Griffiths (2018, as cited in Griffiths and Soruç 2020) combines all the previous definitions and states the definition of learning strategies as “actions chosen by learners for the purpose of learning language” (p.115). The actions that second language learners use for learning purposes, whether if it is “automatic” or "selected," remains a language learning strategy (Griffiths, 2018, as cited in Griffiths and Soruç, 2020).

According to O’Malley et al. (1985, as cited in Griffiths and Soruç 2020), high-level students use metacognitive strategies, which are a set of different techniques to regulate their learning. Ungureanu and Georgescu (2012) explain that successful learners are more likely to have better control over their learning using metacognitive strategies and state that:

Metacognitive strategies consist essentially of reflecting on the personal process, on the understanding of the conditions which favour it, on the organizing and planning of the activities with the view to learning, on the self-evaluation and self-correct (p. 5001).

Furthermore, researchers Bialystok (1981) and Huang and Van Naerssen (1987) concluded that the language learning strategies related to “functional practice were associated with proficiency” (p. 116), and Ehrman and Oxford (1995) concluded that “cognitive strategies such as looking for patterns and reading for pleasure in the target language were the ones used by successful students in their study” (p- 116) (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020). In addition to the previous studies, Green and Oxford (1995) found that using all types of learning strategies is related to high-level students, and in general, the more, the better.

## **2.6. Learning Style**

According to Ellis (2004), learning style refers to “an individual’s preferred way of processing information and of dealing with other people” (p. 534). Learning style is an individual characteristic that can be flexible and adapted by the learner (Little & Singleton, 1990). This means that although language learners may have their own style, they can use other styles in the future. This ability of learners to adapt to different learning styles is related to students that are successful in learning a language (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020).

There are several instruments to measure learning styles. One of the first widely used surveys for language learning was the one created by Reid (1987), known as Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ), and it focused on visual, auditory,

tactile, kinaesthetic, and individual or group preferences (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020). This instrument, with many others, has helped to understand learners' preferences better regarding learning styles.

## **2.7. Motivation**

Motivation is important when talking about second language learning. It has plenty of definitions where the term “key” is used, such as the definition provided by Cohen and Dörnyeu (2002) that says, “motivation is often seen as the key learner variable because without it, nothing much happens” (p. 152, as cited in Griffiths & Soruç 2020). In addition, a great definition of motivation is provided by Gardner (1985):

Refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language. That is, motivation to learn a second language is seen as referring to the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity (p. 10, as cited in Griffiths & Soruç 2020).

Gardner (1985) distinguished two types of motivational orientation: integrative and instrumental. Integrative orientation is defined as a desire to be part of the community of the second language that the learner is learning, and instrumental orientation is defined as a desire to learn the second language for access to an institution, to obtain a job, etc. (Ellis, 2004). Ellis (2004) claims that Gardner “acknowledges that both motivations are important and that they can co-exist in the same learner population” (p. 537).

A different approach to motivation, taken by Deci and Ryan (1980, 2000), divided motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to the learners’

satisfaction, a wish of the learners, while extrinsic motivation refers to what other people want for the learners, outside of the learners. However, these approaches to motivation may be “overly simplistic” when motivation is a “highly complex phenomenon” (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020). The fact that individuals are so complex makes motivation to have several variables that “produce effects which are more-or-less impossible to accurately and consistently predict” (p. 183 Griffiths & Soruç 2020).

## **2.8. Personality**

Richards and Schmidt (2010) define personality as “those aspects of an individual's behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, thought, actions and feelings which are seen as typical and distinctive of that person” (p.441, as cited in Griffiths and Soruç 2020). Personality and other individual differences have different variables, such as anxiety, empathy, self-esteem, and inhibition (Ellis, 2004). When researchers talk about personality, they usually divide this individual difference as a positive or negative effect on language learning. Aspects of personality viewed as positive include enjoyment, extraversion, and confidence, whereas aspects viewed as negative include anxiety, nervousness, and lack of confidence.

Extraversion is defined by Griffiths and Soruç (2020) as “sociable, dominant, prone to taking risks, irresponsible, active, impulsive, and attention-seeking”. According to Ellis (2004), extraversion is the aspect of personality that most attention has gotten, and learners who have this personality trait are more likely to interact with other speakers and be more fluent than introverts. However, this does not mean that extroverts are more accurate than introverts, only that they have more communicative speech.

### **3. Methodology**

Research objective: This project aims to examine the individual differences that learners have in second language learning. In order to do so, a questionnaire was designed to obtain participant data from the English Degree students at Rovira i Virgili University. With the data obtained, I will analyse the opinions of students regarding individual differences and see how these factors influence their language learning.

Questionnaire design: Using the information provided in the theoretical background of this project, a questionnaire was created to document the approaches students use to learn a language. This questionnaire includes a total of fourteen questions explicitly designed for this project. The questionnaire had nine sections regarding the eight individual differences: age, aptitude, autonomy, emotions, language strategies, language style, motivation, and personality, and the last section for general questions. Throughout the questionnaire, participants had to write a number (regarding their age), yes/no type of questions, questions following the Likert-type scale, where participants had to select an answer on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), questions where they have to select factors that they consider essential and questions on a scale from 0 to 10. Furthermore, the questionnaire includes two questions from previous research that were slightly modified to align with this project (see Appendix).

Participants: As mentioned before, the participants of this project are students of the English Degree at Rovira i Virgili University. A total of 25 students participated in the questionnaire, with an initial estimation of participants between fifteen and thirty. In addition, their participation was voluntary, and their responses were kept anonymous.

Data collection: This questionnaire was distributed online using Microsoft Forms to make it more accessible for the participants. It was distributed via message since I considered it a better option due to the instant access through a phone. The timeframe for the data collection started on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May and remained open until the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, giving participants five days to respond to the questionnaire.

Data analysis: Different descriptive statistics will be used to analyse the data from the questionnaire. These descriptive statistics will depend on the type of question being analysed and include these statistical techniques: range, percentage, and mean scale score.

#### **4. Analysis of the data**

##### **4.1. Age**

The age range of the students participating in this project ranges from 20 to 43. Among the participants, the most predominant age is 21, with 11 participants representing 44% of the total. The most predominant age after that is 22, with 5 participants (20%), followed by 23, with 4 participants (16%). In addition, 2 participants are 24 years old (8%), and the ages of 20, 28, and 43 consist of one participant (4% each).

The age range for when the participants started to learn English goes from 2 to 17. The predominant start age of learning English is three years old, with 10 participants (40%). The next most predominant age is six years old, with 5 participants (20%), followed by the age of 5 years old, with 4 participants (16%). In addition, 2 participants started to learn English at seven years old (8%), and the ages of 2, 8, 9, and 17 consisted of 1 participant each (4% each).

A total of 22 (88%) participants consider that their age when starting to learn English influenced their learning experiences. The remaining participants (3 or 12%) consider that age does not influence their learning experience.

Participants generally agree with a mean score of 4.09 that age significantly impacts learning a second language, and with a 4.06 mean score, they also generally agree that younger learners are better at learning a second language than adult learners. However, the mean score in the statement that adult learners can achieve native-like competence in second language learning goes down to 3.74 and to 3.91 in the statement that adult learners have more variables that affect their way of learning a second language than young learners. Nevertheless, these responses are mainly positive since the mean scale indicates a number between 3.74 and 4.09, which indicates agreement.

Table 1: Responses to four questions on a Likert scale to 1 to 5 (strongly disagree: 1, disagree: 2, neutral:3, agree: 4, strongly agree: 5). In raw numbers and the mean (M: mean scale).

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>M</b>
Age has a big impact on learning a second language	1	2	1	9	12	4.09
Younger learners are better at learning a second language than adult learners	1	0	5	9	10	4.06
Adult learners can achieve native-like competence in second language learning	0	3	5	12	5	3.74

Adult learners have more variables that affect their way of learning a second language than young learners	1	0	4	13	7	3.91
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## 4.2. Aptitude

This questionnaire section defined *aptitude* and *aptitude tests* since participants may not know exactly what these terms mean.

A total of 14 participants, 56%, claim they have never done an aptitude test. The rest of the 11 participants claim that they have done an aptitude test, with a 44% out of the total.

Participants generally agree that motivation and opportunity affect language learning in addition to aptitude, with a mean score of 4.04, and that aptitude is important in language learning, with a mean score of 3.77. However, the mean score goes down to 3.26 when it states that aptitude measures innate ability and that aptitude measures language learning potential, with a mean score of 3.39. The lowest mean score of this section goes to the definition of aptitude as 'talent' with a mean score of 3.13.

Table 2: Responses to five questions on a Likert scale to 1 to 5 (strongly disagree: 1, disagree: 2, neutral:3, agree: 4, strongly agree: 5). In raw numbers and the mean (M: mean scale).

	1	2	3	4	5	M
Aptitude is important in language learning	1	0	1	18	5	3.77
Aptitude tests measure innate ability	0	3	15	5	2	3.26

Aptitude tests measure language learning potential	0	4	7	13	1	3.39
Aptitude is a 'talent' for language learning	1	8	10	5	1	3.13
Motivation and opportunity affect language learning in addition to aptitude	1	0	1	10	13	4.04

### 4.3. Autonomy

Overall, participants show a high level of comfort using technology to support their own learning with a mean score of 4.23, and they agree on the importance of technology for their improvement with a mean score of 4.12. In addition, they show confidence in their ability to take charge of their own learning, with a mean score of 3.72.

Table 3: Responses to three questions on a Likert scale to 1 to 5 (strongly disagree: 1, disagree: 2, neutral:3, agree: 4, strongly agree: 5). In raw numbers and the mean (M: mean scale).

	1	2	3	4	5	M
I am confident in my ability to take charge of my own learning	1	1	5	12	6	3.72
I am comfortable using technology to support my own learning	1	0	2	7	15	4.23
Technology has a big importance in the improvement of my own language learning	0	3	1	9	12	4.12

#### 4.4. Emotions

Participants generally have negative emotions when making a mistake in English, with a mean score of 3.68 and with the same mean score of 3.68, participants show confidence when speaking in English. With the lowest mean score, participants generally disagree with feeling anxious when speaking in English. In addition, with the highest mean score of the section, participants show a high level of agreement when they successfully communicate with native speakers, with a mean score of 4.47.

Table 4: Responses to four questions on a Likert scale to 1 to 5 (strongly disagree: 1, disagree: 2, neutral:3, agree: 4, strongly agree: 5). In raw numbers and the mean (M: mean scale).

	1	2	3	4	5	M
I have negative emotions when making a mistake in English	2	5	6	6	6	3.68
I feel anxious speaking in English	2	11	6	4	2	2.97
I feel confident speaking in English	2	4	6	10	3	3.68
I feel excited when I successfully communicate with a native speaker of English	1	0	2	6	16	4.47

#### 4.5. Learning Strategies

Participants generally agree with the importance of having control over their learning, with a mean score of 3.92. In addition, they highly agree that learning strategies play an important role in language learning, with a mean score of 4.17.

Table 5: Responses to two questions on a Likert scale to 1 to 5 (strongly disagree: 1, disagree: 2, neutral:3, agree: 4, strongly agree: 5). In raw numbers and the mean (M: mean scale).

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>M</b>
It is important to have control over my own language learning	1	1	1	11	11	3.92
Learning strategies play an important role in language learning	1	0	2	10	12	4.17

#### 4.6. Learning style

Participants generally show familiarity with the concept of 'learning styles' with a mean score of 3.63 and agree that they can adapt their learning style depending on the task or situation. In addition, they also agree with a mean score of 4.03 that understanding their own learning style can help them in their language learning journey.

Table 6: Responses to three questions on a Likert scale to 1 to 5 (strongly disagree: 1, disagree: 2, neutral:3, agree: 4, strongly agree: 5). In raw numbers and the mean (M: mean scale).

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>M</b>
I am familiar with the concept of ‘learning styles’ in language learning	1	3	5	9	7	3.63
I agree with the statement that learners can adapt their learning style depending on the task or situation	2	1	3	12	7	3.82
Understanding my own learning style can help me in my language learning journey	1	0	3	12	9	4.03

#### **4.7. Motivation**

Participants generally agree with the statements that they learn English to improve themselves, with a mean score of 4.06, and show a high agreement of being interested in the culture of the language, with a mean score of 4.31. Furthermore, most of them learn English for their own satisfaction, with a mean score of 4.15, and they highly agree that English is beneficial for their future careers, with a mean score of 4.67. However, a lower mean score is seen with the maintenance of motivation over time, with a 3.58.

Table 7: Responses to five questions on a Likert scale to 1 to 5 (strongly disagree: 1, disagree: 2, neutral:3, agree: 4, strongly agree: 5). In raw numbers and the mean (M: mean scale).

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>M</b>
I learn English so I can improve myself	1	0	2	13	9	4.06

I am interested in the culture of the language that I am learning (English)	1	0	1	8	15	4.31
I learn English for my own satisfaction	0	1	2	9	13	4.15
I think learning English is beneficial for my future career	1	0	0	4	20	4.67
I think language learners maintain their motivation over time	1	3	9	7	5	3.58

#### 4.8. Personality

Participants generally agree that extraversion affects their language experience, with a mean score of 3.38. They also agree with the influence of their personality traits in their approaches to learning a language, with a mean score of 3.93, and with the impact of the success of their personality in their language learning, with a mean score of 3.95.

Table 8: Responses to three questions on a Likert scale to 1 to 5 (strongly disagree: 1, disagree: 2, neutral:3, agree: 4, strongly agree: 5). In raw numbers and the mean (M: mean scale).

	1	2	3	4	5	M
My level of extraversion affects my language experience	1	3	10	7	4	3.38
My personality traits have influenced my approach to learning a (second) language	1	0	5	9	10	3.93

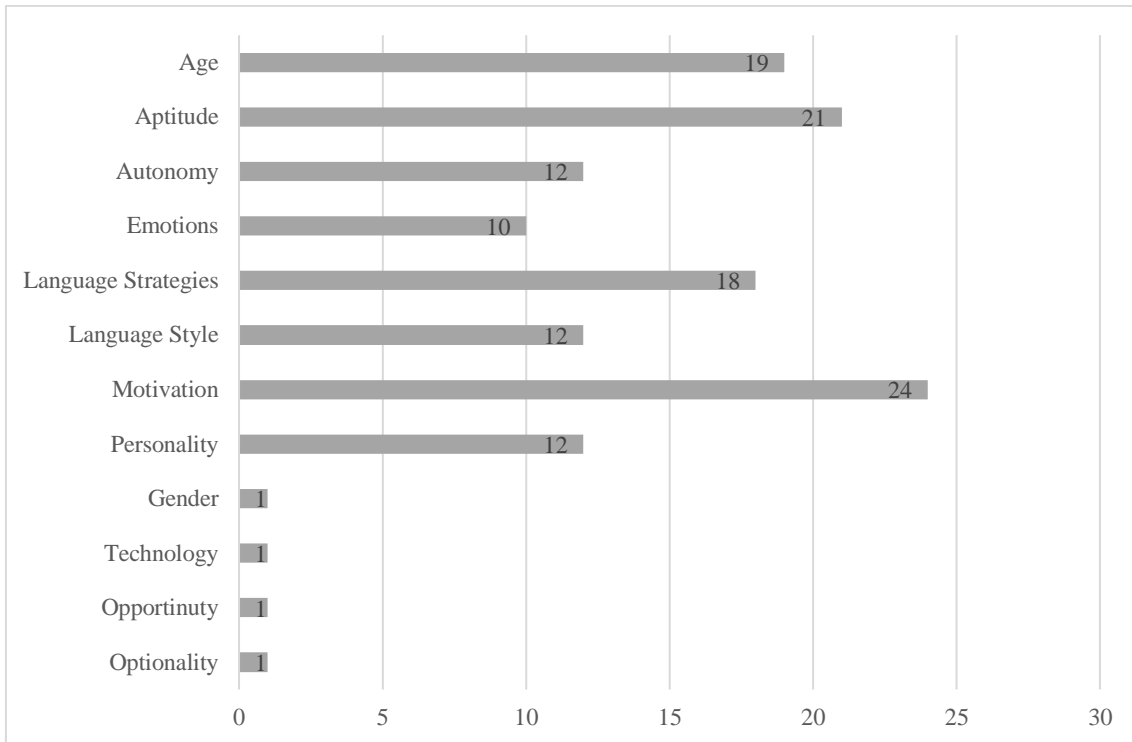
My personality has impacted in the success of my language learning (English)	3	0	3	11	8	3.95
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#### 4.9. General

The last part of the questionnaire contained general questions to see the participant's general views about the eight individual differences.

There were four factors predominantly higher chosen by participants: motivation (24 votes), aptitude (21 votes), age (19 votes), and language strategies (18 votes). Following these four factors, three were voted the same number of times (12 votes): autonomy, language style, and personality. Furthermore, the factor of emotion was the less voted by the participants (10 votes). In addition to the eight factors given, there was a box where participants could write a factor not mentioned during the questionnaire that they considered necessary. The four factors written by the participants were: gender, technology, opportunity, and optionality, with one vote each.

Table 9: Responses to the selection of factors with multiple options to the question: which of the following factor do you think are important for a successful language learning?



It is seen that participants do not interact with their families in English, with a mean score of 1.61. Regarding interacting with friends, the mean score increases significantly compared to the previous question, with a mean score of 5.08. Furthermore, self-instruction and reading have a mean score of 7.06 and 7.19, respectively, which indicates that participants usually do these things in English. Finally, the mean score for watching Tv/series/films in English, listening to music, and using social media is 8.84, 9.19, and 9.13, respectively, indicating that participants spend most of their time doing these activities in English.

Table 10: Responses on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 meaning never and 10 always) to the question: to what extent are you currently exposed to this (second) language in the following contexts. In raw numbers and the mean (M: mean scale).

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	M
Interacting with family	13	4	0	2	2	1	1	0	2	0	0	1.61
Interacting with friends	2	3	1	3	1	3	1	1	5	1	4	5.08
Self-instruction	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	4	8	2	4	7.06
Reading	0	1	1	1	1	1	4	3	6	3	4	7.19
Watching TV/series/films	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	3	4	12	8.84
Listening to music	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	6	0	16	9.19
Social media	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	4	2	14	9.13

## 5. Discussion

This project aims to examine the individual differences of second language learners with a questionnaire answered by English Degree students from the Rovira i Virgili University to see what they think about learning a second language and how they learnt a second language. The questionnaire includes fourteen questions regarding eight individual differences (age, aptitude, autonomy, emotions, learning strategies, learning style, motivation, and personality) previously discussed in the theoretical background. The data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed using different techniques depending on the question analysed.

### 5.1. Age

The analysis indicates that the predominant age of the participants is 21 years old, which is logical, considering that English Degree students completed the questionnaire, most of them from the last course. Most students start to learn English at three years old, which concurs with what is believed about *the younger, the better* in language learning. However, a participant started to learn English at the age of 17, and according to Griffiths and Soruç (2020), this participant had more variables that affected the way of learning than the rest of the participants. Furthermore, all participants are English students at university, which means that they should have a high level of English, meaning that even though a participant learned at 17, this student has learned the language.

The participants generally agree that the age at the time of starting to learn English influences their learning experiences and has a significant impact when learning a second language. This aligns with the theory provided by Griffiths and Soruç (2020) about age-related differences, which provides possible explanations such as the critical period for learning a language, psycho-affective factors that explain why young learners are usually more successful than adult learners, and social and ecological contexts in learners.

Participants generally agree that young learners are better when learning a second language than adult learners, and also to the statement that adults have more variables that affect their learning. The agreement of these statements corresponds with the theory provided by Griffiths and Soruç (2020) that adult learners have more variables at their time of learning a language that affects in some way their learning experience and makes it easier for younger learners to learn. There was a lower level of agreement than in the other statements when participants were asked if adults could achieve a native-like competence. According to Griffiths and Soruç (2020), it is true that some studies show a

negative outcome when adults learn a language; however, in more recent studies, there is growing evidence of the native-like achievement among adult learners (Ellis, 2008).

## **5.2. Aptitude**

A significant part of the participants claims to have never taken an aptitude test, which I find strange since students have to take an aptitude test at the end of primary and secondary school. This indicates that participants may not understand what an aptitude test is, or they did not take it in their schools and high schools.

On average, participants show low agreement with aptitude being important when learning a language. This suggests that participants relate aptitude to an advantage in learning a language.

Participants show a level of neutrality or a lower level of agreement with the statement that aptitude tests measure innate ability and also show a level of neutrality a bit higher than in the previous statement, with the statement that aptitude tests measure language learning potential. These results align with the theory of Griffiths and Soruç (2020) about aptitude tests measuring innate ability or other factors.

The use of 'talent' as part of the definition of aptitude has the lowest level of agreement or a neutral position when compared with other results. This shows that they do not relate the definition of aptitude with 'talent' and that definitions of aptitude, such as the one given by Chalmers et al. (2021), do not necessarily align with what they consider aptitude.

Finally, there is an agreement among the participants about the effect that motivation and opportunity have in addition to aptitude, and it indicates that the presence of other factors, such as these two, are important in their language learning. This result aligns with what Carroll (1981) stated about aptitude.

### **5.3. Autonomy**

Participants indicated being confident when taking charge of their language learning; however, it presents the lowest mean score among the three statements. This can be related to the theory presented by Gao, Zhang, and Unishoda (2011), which includes other factors that could be why some participants are not confident in being autonomous in their language learning.

Participants agree with being comfortable using technology that supports their language learning. The instant access to the internet and the control that they have while using their devices help students to be comfortable when taking control of their language learning. In addition, participants agree that technology is important for their language learning since it provides resources for individual and independent language learning.

### **5.4. Emotions**

Participants generally agree with having negative emotions when making mistakes in English. The negative responses can result in the impediment to progress in learning a language, but these negative emotions need to be addressed with strategies or techniques to help participants overcome these emotions (Rahimi & Bigdeli, 2014).

Participants generally disagree with feeling anxious when speaking in English. This result was not expected since anxiety is the most researched emotion. Anxiety is a negative emotion that is related to being debilitating for language learning (Scovel, 1978), and the fact that the participants disagree with feeling this negative emotion when speaking in English shows that they do not have this emotion as an impediment to their language learning journey.

Participants generally show confidence when speaking in English, which indicates that they are willing to communicate and do not struggle since they have positive emotions.

Participants show a high level of excitement when they successfully communicate with native speakers, which indicates that they experience positive emotions. Being excited can increase their confidence and motivation, which will help them succeed in their learning.

### **5.5. Learning Strategies**

The agreement over the importance of having control over their language learning means that participants recognise the benefits of learning strategies and are likely to be successful students (Green & Oxford, 1995). In addition, participants agree that learning strategies play an important role in language learning, which suggests that they understand the importance of this factor in their learning process.

### **5.6. Learning Style**

Participants have a low level of agreement with the familiarity of the concept of learning style, meaning that some of them might not be fully aware of its meaning and benefits.

Participants agree that they can adapt their language style depending on the task or situation, which suggests that they are generally flexible, and choose what suits best for them. This result aligns with what Griffiths and Soruç (2020) state about successful students being related to the ability to adapt to other learning styles. In addition, participants agree with the importance of understanding their learning style and the benefits of adaptability for success and progress in their language learning.

## **5.7. Motivation**

Participants show agreement with the statement that they learn English to improve themselves, which indicates that they perceive learning English as a personal development and goal and concurs with the definition that Gardner (1985) provides.

Participants show a high level of agreement regarding their interest in English culture. Furthermore, they show that they want to be part of the community of English, which according to Gardner (1985), is classified as an integrative orientation.

Participants agree that they learn English for their own satisfaction; it is their wish to learn the language, and according to Deci and Ryan (1980, 2000), this classifies as intrinsic motivation.

The highest level of agreement for participants is the statement that says that they learn English because it is beneficial for their future career, which forms part of the instrumental orientation since the participant wants to obtain a job or have access to places where English is required. This result was foreseen since students with an English Degree are expected to use English in their future jobs.

Participants show high neutrality in the statement that language learners can maintain their motivation over time. Motivation is a complex factor that can have different variables in each individual, such as learning difficulties or external circumstances, which makes it difficult to maintain the same level of motivation over time (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020). For these reasons, it is understandable that most participants show neutrality in this part of the questionnaire.

## **5.8. Personality**

Participants show a high level of neutrality toward the statement that the level of extraversion affects their language experience. Extraversion positively affects language learning because they take more risks, are more impulsive than the rest, and are more likely to interact with other speakers. This result shows that participants have a more neutral response, and this could be because they do not know whether this affects them or not.

Participants agree that personality traits have influenced their approach to learning English. This relates to the theory that each individual is different and the variables that each has influence in one way or another, such as in the learning strategies and styles that they choose, or inhibition, among many others (Ellis, 2004).

Participants agree that personality has impacted their success in learning English since some aspects of their personality can highly influence their outcomes, such as their attitudes, feelings, or actions (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

## **5.9. General**

Over the eight individual differences presented in the thesis, participants voted motivation, aptitude, age, and language strategies (in this order) as the most important for successful language learning.

Motivation is the most important factor for participants, which is clearly shown in the section of questions of motivation, having the highest mean scores (not taking into account Table 10). This can be interpreted as a crucial factor for students to succeed in learning a language.

Aptitude was not expected as one of the most important factors chosen by participants. However, the result of the questionnaire shows that the mean score for the importance of aptitude is 3.77, a low agreement compared to other results, such as language learning, with a mean score of 3.92.

Age is the third most important factor chosen by participants. This result was expected since the issue of age has been a topic of discussion for years, and the critical period for learning a language and the debate of adult learning has an important role in the field.

Participants consider that language strategies are the fourth most important factor in individuals.

In the last question of the questionnaire, it is seen that participants do not interact with their family in English, which indicates that English is not a first language in their family environment. However, there is an increase when it comes to interacting with friends, which suggests that participants use more English with their friends than with their family, and this could be due to having friends from different countries or practicing the language. The mean score increases with respect to the two previous points, to 7.06 and 7.19 for self-instruction and reading, respectively. This suggests that participants are engaged with English materials, which is understandable since they are studying for the English Degree, and all of the content is in English. Finally, the higher mean scores go to listening to music, social media, and watching TV/series/films. This suggests that participants are interested in the language and are highly exposed to these activities in English, which is beneficial for them since they learn unconsciously if they spend considerable time in these activities.

## **6. Conclusion**

This project aimed to examine individual differences in SLL among English Degree students at Rovira i Virgili University. The analysis of the questionnaire sent to the participants revealed that most of them agree with the theory proposed by previous researchers about the eight individual differences explained throughout the project (age, aptitude, autonomy, emotions, language strategies, language style, motivation, and personality).

The eight individual differences analysed during this project show that they determine the level of success of language learners. Each factor influences other factors that are distinctive to each individual, which means that each participant in this project has a unique and distinctive way of learning a second language. How they acknowledge their weaknesses and strengths regarding their individual factors determines their success in their language learning.

In terms of age, students agree that the age of starting to learn English is important and influences their experience learning a second language. Most of them started to learn English at an early age. However, there is a students that started their language learning at a more advanced age (17 years old), which could have more variables than younger learners, but ultimately they achieve a good level of the language since this student is in their third or fourth year of the English Degree.

Regarding aptitude, some participants claimed to have never taken an aptitude test, which is surprising due to the number of tests in education. There is a generally low level of agreement with the importance of aptitude in language learning, which is surprising since aptitude is in the second position of the most important individual factor voted by

participants. In addition, there is a level of neutrality among participants regarding whether aptitude tests measure innate ability or language learning potential, which aligns with the theory, and participants also recognise motivation as an addition to aptitude.

In terms of autonomy, students are comfortable taking charge of their learning, recognise technology as important for their learning autonomy, and feel comfortable using it.

Students have negative emotions when making a mistake in English, which has to be addressed with strategies to overcome them (Rahimi & Bigdeli, 2014). Furthermore, it is surprising that most students do not feel anxious when speaking in English since it is the most researched emotion, but this shows that anxiety does not impede their language learning. In addition, they are confident when speaking in English and have high levels of positive emotions when they successfully communicate with native speakers.

Language strategies are important for students, and they agree that using learning strategies and having control over them is essential to succeed. In addition, students are familiar, but on a low scale, with the concept of learning style, and they can adapt their way of learning depending on the situation, which is beneficial to progress in their language learning.

Motivation is the most important factor for students. They learn English to improve themselves, have an interest in the English culture, learn English for their own satisfaction, and learn English for their future career. However, they view the maintenance of motivation over time from a more neutral perspective, which was not expected since the theory shows that it is difficult to maintain motivation over time, and students usually have variables that affect their level of motivation.

Regarding personality, the influence of extraversion in their language learning has a neutral response. Students agree that personality traits have influenced and impacted their success in learning English.

Students classify motivation as the most important factor, followed by aptitude, age, and language learning. In addition, students have a high level of exposure to English when it comes to listening to music, social media, and watching TV/series/films, which indicates interest and learning.

To conclude, this project provided insights into students' individual factors. The findings show the importance of considering these individual factors and knowing what works best for their learning and how each factor influences others. Being able to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each student is beneficial in order to have successful language learning.

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## **Appendix**

### **Questionnaire:**

AGE:

1. How old are you?
2. At what age did you start to learn English?
3. Do you think your age at the time of starting your second language learning influenced your language learning experience? YES/NO
4. Please check whether you Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly agree.
  - Age has a big impact on learning a (second) language.
  - Younger learners are better at learning a second language than adult learners.
  - Adult learners can achieve a native-like competence in (second) language learning.
  - Adult learners have more variables that affect their way of learning a (second) language than young learners.

## APTITUDE:

\*Definition: 'an individual's initial capacity for learning a (foreign) language, and probable facility in doing so given the presence of motivation and opportunity'. (Carroll, 1981)

\*Aptitude test: a test designed to determine a person's ability in a particular skill or field of knowledge.

5. Have you ever done an aptitude test? YES/NO
6. Please check whether you Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly agree.
  - Aptitude is important in language learning.
  - Aptitude tests measure innate ability.
  - Aptitude tests measure language learning potential.
  - Aptitude is a “talent” for language learning.
  - Motivation and opportunity affect language learning in addition to aptitude.

## AUTONOMY:

7. Please check whether you Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly agree.
  - I am confident in my ability to take charge of my own learning.
  - I am comfortable using technology to support my own autonomous learning.
  - Technology has a big importance in the improvement of my own language learning.

## EMOTIONS:

8. Please check whether you Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly agree.
- I have negative emotions when making a mistake in the language that I am learning (English).
  - I feel anxious when speaking in the language that I am learning (English).
  - I feel confident speaking in the language I am learning (English).
  - I feel excited when I successfully communicate with a native speaker in the language that I am learning (English).

#### LEARNING STRATEGIES:

9. Please check whether you Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly agree.
- It is important to have control over my own language learning.
  - Learning strategies play an important role in language learning.

#### LEARNING STYLE:

10. Please check whether you Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly agree.
- I am familiar with the concept of 'learning styles' in language learning.
  - I agree with the statement that learners can adapt their learning style depending on the task or situation.
  - Understanding my own learning style can help me in my language learning journey.

#### MOTIVATION:

11. Please check whether you Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly agree. (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020)

- I learn a language (English) so I can improve myself.
- I am interested in the culture of the language that I am learning (English)
- I learn a language (English) for my own satisfaction.
- I think learning a language (English) is beneficial for my future career.
- I think language learners maintain their motivation over time.

#### PERSONALITY:

12- Please check whether you Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly agree.

- My level of extraversion affects my language experience.
- My personality traits have influenced my approach to learning a (second) language.
- My personality has impacted in the success of my language learning (English).

#### GENERAL:

13. Which of the following factors do you think are important for successful language learning? (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020)

- Age
- Aptitude
- Autonomy
- Emotions
- Language learning
- Language style

- Motivation
- Personality

14. On a scale of 0-10 (0 represents never and 10 always), to what extent are you currently exposed to this (second) language in the following contexts:

- Interacting with family
- Interacting with friends
- Self-instruction
- Reading
- Watching tv/series/films
- Listening to music
- Social media