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Assessing individual differences in SLA research: Issues and challenges

Research into individual difference (ID) variables constitutes an important line of inquiry in the field of SLA which has generated thousands of empirical studies (Ellis, 2008; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Griffiths & Soruç, 2020; Pawlak & Kruk, 2022). Such studies have pursued different goals, the most important of which have been to determine links between a specific ID variable and target language (TL) attainment, and to relate it to other ID factors. The main issue that empirical investigations of this kind need to face, however, is the way in which ID variables are operationalized and measured. For one thing, the available data collection tools might draw on diverse theories of a given construct, such as motivation or foreign language aptitude, which might make the findings of different empirical investigations hard to compare. Moreover, ID factors can be examined from a macro-perspective, where the aim is to establish general patterns and oftentimes also to explore relationships with other variables, or a micro-perspective, in which case a ID variable is investigated with respect to the performance of a particular task by a specific group of learners, etc. The paper aims to address such issues adopting as a point of reference data collection tools that can be employed to tap into positive and negative emotions that inevitably accompany the process of learning additional languages in the classroom or outside, “in the wild” (e.g., enjoyment and boredom). It demonstrates how such emotions can be tapped into in various contexts and shows how assessments of affective states can inform SLA research.