
Understanding Second Language Learning Difficulties

Review by Yoshiyuki Nakata

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UNDERSTANDING SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING DIFFICULTIES. Madeline E. Ehrman. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1996. Pp. xvii + 346.

Many language teachers face students who appear to have severe learning difficulties when it comes to second language learning. Often the root cause is that instructors try to force upon their students methodologies that conflict with the students' needs and preferred learning styles. *Understanding Second Language Learning Difficulties* addresses this issue with particular insight, taking into consideration such matters as learning styles, learning strategies, personality, dispositions, motivation, self-efficacy, and anxiety. The text devotes a significant amount of attention to the practical implications of the aforementioned styles and strategies as well as to affective factors. As such, this volume could be used as an effective introduction to the study of learner variables in second language learning.

This book consists of twelve chapters in which the issues receive attention from practical and theoretical standpoints. Each chapter includes case studies, exercises, and an easy to read summary to enable the reader to fully understand the concepts being developed. Chapters two and three introduce practical techniques for direct data collection, and for interviewing students, whether formally or informally. Chapter four, five, and six review traditional theories concerning learning styles, while focusing on field independence and field sensitivity, and on relating to personality models. Chapter seven highlights the affective dimension and deals with motivation, self-efficacy, and anxiety. It focuses on defense mechanisms within the dimension of students' anxiety and with that of teachers' feelings concerning the learning/teaching process. Chapter eight deals with concerns related to background such as sex, age, native language and culture, etc. Chapter nine complements and completes the theme of data collection raised in earlier chapters and chapter ten presents five extended case studies which demonstrate the necessity of going beyond surface appearances when studying the learning context of students. Chapter eleven provides a taxonomy of learning disabilities, some case material, and a few very general approaches which could help teachers meet students' individual needs. The final chapter stresses the need for educators to continually review learning strategies, student feeling mismatches, and to test our hypotheses before accepting them.

One minor drawback of this book is the vast amount of material on multiple theories and models which might seem confusing. That being said, the material is comprehensive and should encourage patient readers to understand the need to widen our focus when considering their students' needs.

The author is particularly careful to stress the need for varied approaches to meet varied needs. As an educator myself, I have found that a close reading of this volume has provided me with ample insight and many useful tools for dealing with students having problems learning a second language.

About the Reviewer

Yoshiyuki Nakata received his MA in TESL from St. Michael's College in Vermont. He is a full-time lecturer at Himeji Hinomoto College. His interests include pronunciation and language learning motivation.

