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PREFACE

In 2005, Zoltán published the original *The Psychology of the Language Learner: Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition*, and a decade later we have decided to revisit this book. In this short preface we would like to explain why we thought that such a revisit was a good idea, what such a revisit involves, and what we hoped our book might achieve besides offering an updated literature review.

Why Is a Revisitation a Good Idea?

Looking at the title of the current volume, *The Psychology of the Language Learner—Revisited*, raises the obvious question of what made this revisit necessary. The obvious answer is that because 10 years have passed since the publication of the original book, the literature that the material was drawing on could do with an update. After all, as we shall see later, the past decade has seen no fewer than six edited volumes published on the subject of language learning motivation alone—to take but one individual difference (ID) construct—and the number of research papers on various ID issues has been in the hundreds. This reflects a genuine surge of productivity in the area, thus warranting a fresh look at the field. Having said that, the need to account for the new research explains only in part our decision to readdress the ID issue. Indeed, while we shall review a great amount of post-2005 literature in the following chapters, our main interest underlying this volume has been in documenting the fundamentally changing concept of ‘individual differences’ in general and how the emerging new understanding can be applied to SLA research in particular.

At the turn of the second millennium—when the original book was written—the notion of IDs seemed like a relatively straightforward answer to the age-old

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question of “Why do individuals differ so much in second language attainment success?” At that time the field of SLA was virtually uniform in agreeing that a great deal of the observed variation in L2 learning achievement could be attributed to a well-definable cluster of learner characteristics, which were conveniently termed “individual differences.” The positive reception of the 2005 book, then, could be explained by the fact that it embraced this widespread view and attempted the sensible task of taking stock of the most important ID factors in SLA in a systematic and yet accessible manner.

Looking back, we may conclude that the publication of *The Psychology of the Language Learner: Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition* marked something of a watershed in the ID literature. On the one hand, it did accomplish its task of delivering a rounded overview of research that had been conducted on various learner characteristics in the field of SLA. On the other hand, it also drew a line under the ‘classic’ avenue of ID research, pointing at new directions; as the conclusion explicitly stated, “All the variables described in this book are either in the process of, or in desperate need of, theoretical restructuring” (p. 218). The discussion, however, stopped at this point, and it is perhaps testimony to the vitality of our field that a book that seemed rather provocative in some of its conclusions in 2005 now appears somewhat conservative. Thus, the current revisitation is aimed at picking up the flow where the 2005 book left off and carrying the critical process forward by assessing to what extent and in what ways the various ID factors have undergone restructuring over the past decade.

What Will the Revisitation Involve?

It is fair to say that we were both hesitant, even apprehensive, about revisiting the 2005 book for several reasons. First, both of us have been increasingly critical of the value or relevance of the traditional ID paradigm, with one of us (Dörnyei, 2009b) going as far as to question its very existence, labeling it a mere myth. Second, we shared the concern that the theoretical framework underpinning the original book might be so far removed from current understandings that we would find the text only had historical value as an artifact of a bygone era, functioning merely as a snapshot of thinking about psychology and SLA at a particular point in time. This, we feared, would make the ‘revisitation’ a more challenging task than a ‘revision’ in the ordinary sense, because we would need to produce, in effect, a novel, comprehensive theoretical system—and a matching new research summary—of learner characteristics. We were hesitant as to whether we were ready to accomplish this task, but then we realized that there might be an alternative approach to conducting such a revisitation: We could start a critical dialogue with the original material that would reinvigorate the 2005 text through exposure to current theoretical perspectives. This would involve, in other words, taking the 2005 text as a baseline and then evaluating how recent findings fit, or do not fit, into the 2005 classic framework.

Following from this realization, the current volume takes the peculiar stance of trying to convey a sense of continuity and discontinuity at the same time, which is further reflected by the fact that it is not presented as a second edition of the 2005 text, but rather as a new book juxtaposed with the old one, also involving a new co-author. For Stephen, the 2005 text represented something of an entry point into the field, the prevailing orthodoxy; thus he approaches the text from a very different perspective than Zoltán does; we believe that this contrast in authorial perspectives further contributes to a rich ongoing dialogue throughout the text. Nevertheless, we are well aware that this revisitation is a little bit like trying to have our cake and eat it too, but we think that such a dual perspective might offer a useful interface with the current state of the art of the field. As the discussion in the next chapters will show, the study of individual differences is in a theoretical turmoil, with powerful arguments suggesting that IDs do not exist as such and also that they do. Indeed, most scholars specialized in ID research seem to operate with one foot in the past and one foot in the future, with the current authors being no exceptions. For example, although Zoltán has been in the forefront of arguing in favor of the rejection of a ‘simplistic’ notion of IDs in principle, he has been happy to conduct extensive research on one of the principal ID factors, motivation, without resolving the controversy of what this construct really is. Thus, our primary objective in this volume is to place the theoretical dilemmas concerning individual differences in a framework that will be conducive to progression; we do so as both friend and foe, which at times admittedly required a delicate balancing act. A simple update would have been a useful but, we feel, an essentially backward-looking approach, and instead, we have decided to take a more adventurous path.

Who Is This Revisitation For?

The current volume, *The Psychology of the Language Learner—Revisited*, operates on two levels. First, it presents an up-to-date account of theory and research, thereby providing a (hopefully) valuable resource for students and researchers entering the field. Second, the dialogic nature of the revisitation means that it will (again, hopefully) also be of interest to established academics looking to engage in a critical consideration of how the field is developing, even those familiar with the 2005 text. So, the way we envisaged this book gives plenty of people a reason to buy a copy.

What Do We Hope to Achieve with Our Visit and How?

In order to make the dialogue with the 2005 version meaningful and accessible, we retained as much of the original structure as possible. The sequence of the chapters follows a well-established pathway, starting with a general discussion of the ID issue and then proceeding from the broad toward the narrow by covering

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personality, aptitude, motivation, styles, strategies, and other learner characteristics. We shall start each chapter with a general reflection of the topic in the light of recent advances; we will then go on to introduce the specific learner characteristic in a systematic manner, outlining the main perspectives on the subject in the literature; finally, we will conclude with a focus on how recent developments in the field have shed new light on the topic, and in which direction the field is moving.

In conclusion, we would like to stress that we have no axes to grind. The original book expressed some strong opinions (e.g., on learning strategies) and some novel views (e.g., on motivation), which elicited a considerable response in the field over the years that followed. The current revisitation, however, has not been motivated by a desire to defend our position or argue our case. We find the concept of learner characteristics genuinely intriguing—and sometimes also genuinely annoying!—and we have approached the current task as travelers do when they return to a land after a long interval, excited about the journey of rediscovering what has changed and what remained the same. Please join us.

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