



# Module 11

## Individual Learner Differences

Focus on the Learner

**Video Length: Approximately 13 Minutes**  
**Notes to the Trainer**

For best results, have participants go through the readings for this module prior to viewing the video. As you work through this module, use pairs or groups whenever you think it might be effective. After each group activity, debrief the answers and use them for further discussion of various points. Refer back to the main points when appropriate. It is important that teachers apply the concepts in the module to their own classrooms and situations. The main goal is for participants to begin thinking positively and creatively about their own students' individual differences and how planning for those differences can lead to a richer, more motivating classroom.

See Appendix A for additional handouts that can be used for general observation and discussion tasks with any of the modules.

### **Before Viewing**

Ask participants to think about any group of people that they know well. It can be family members, students, friends, or colleagues. Have them choose three members of that group to describe, listing their personal and intellectual characteristics or habits on a three-column chart. Participants can then get into small groups and compare their lists, perhaps adding items to their personal lists that others have included. An example follows.

<b>Person A</b>	<b>Person B</b>	<b>Person C</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Quiet</li><li>• Likes school</li><li>• Sings well</li><li>• Enjoys hands-on activities</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Athletic</li><li>• Understands ideas quickly</li><li>• A leader; other people do what s/he says to do</li><li>• Good at debates</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social, likes to be with others</li><li>• Likeable</li><li>• Speaks two languages</li><li>• Talks a lot</li><li>• Doesn't like to read</li></ul>

- Once participants have created a list, have them do the following together as a group.
1. Check the characteristics of each individual that you think would help them to learn another language, whether inside or outside a classroom.
  2. For each person, list two types of activities that he or she might do well in a classroom setting.

### **Debrief**

Make an all-class list for #2 above, asking participants to explain why they think that person would do well on the listed activity. Brainstorm ideas for varying activities in the classroom.

# Module 11: Individual Learner Differences

## Extension Ideas

Psychologist Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences offers one kind of explanation for learner differences. According to Gardner, there are eight different types of intelligences:

- Linguistic: Sensitivity to spoken and written language, the ability to learn languages.
- Logical-mathematical: Capacity to analyze problems logically, carry out mathematical operations.
- Visual-spatial: Able to recognize and use the patterns of wide space and more confined areas.
- Musical: Skill in the performance, composition, and appreciation of musical patterns.
- Bodily-kinesthetic: Potential to use one's whole body or parts of the body to solve problems.
- Interpersonal: Capacity to understand the intentions, motivations and desires of other people.
- Intrapersonal: Capacity to understand oneself, to appreciate one's feelings, fears and motivations.
- Naturalistic: Able to recognize, categorize and draw upon certain features of the environment.

Some key principles are:

1. Individuals should be encouraged to use their preferred intelligences in learning.
2. Instructional activities should appeal to different forms of intelligence.
3. Assessment of learning should measure multiple forms of intelligence.

Visit Web sites with learning style questionnaires: *LDRC* <<http://www.ldrc.ca/projects/miinventory/miinventory.php>> and *Index of Learning Styles* <<http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/ILSpage.html>>.

## Preview Vocabulary

Terms	Definitions
Differentiated instruction	Teacher response to differences in learners; teacher variation in teaching in order to create the best learning experience possible for individuals or small groups.
Learning centers; stations	Areas of a classroom that are set up for specific purposes, such reading or working with objects.
Metacognition	The knowledge and self-awareness a learner has of one's own language learning process.
Motivation	Psychological factors that determine how much effort learners are willing to apply to accomplish or learn something.
Personality traits	Particular qualities in someone's character.
Proficiency level	The level of a learner's language ability. How much language the learner knows and can use.
Self-access room, area	A room or area of a room where materials are available for students to choose and use by themselves.
Strategy instruction	Teaches students about learning strategies and how and when to use them; helps students identify personally effective strategies, and encourages them to make strategic behaviors a systematic part of their learning.

Now start the video. Listen to the introduction. Complete the guided observation and reflection tasks for each of the video segments. The next part of the manual is for trainees and is available on separate pages for ease of copying.

# Focus on the Learner

## Module 11, Individual Learner Differences

### Introduction, Expanded Narrative

The learners in any classroom are both similar and different. An understanding of such similarities and differences help teachers determine what to teach and how to teach it. In a private school class of Russian students studying English, for example, the similarities might be that all the students speak the same language, they are all around the same age, they are all literate in their own language, and they come from the same socio-economic background. However, some of them may be girls, some boys. Some may like school and some may not; some may find learning a language easy, some will find it difficult. Some may feel happy most of the time, some unhappy. And some of the students may have special needs, such as hearing difficulties, poor eyesight, or difficulty sitting still.

These are some factors that lead to learning differences:

- Age
- Gender
- Personality traits
- Cognitive ability
- Cognitive development stage
- Socio-economic status
- Preferred learning styles and strengths
- Educational background
- Language proficiency level
- Motivation

There has been a long history of research about some of the factors listed above. One direction for this research has been to try to understand cognition. This research has led to:

- A better understanding of the stages of cognitive development
- The development of Intelligence Quotient (I.Q.) tests
- Attempts to categorize different learning styles
- The theory that there are different kinds of human cognition that can be classified, as in multiple intelligences

Another research direction has looked at motivation, in an attempt to figure out what makes learners want to learn. A third direction has been in the area of age-related learning differences, which has led to suggestions for age-appropriate teaching techniques.

### Module Focus

The focus in Module 11 is on how teachers can vary teaching approaches and techniques to help facilitate learning for a wide variety of students and student needs. This variation can include:

- Input using different types of language: formal, informal, academic, social, etc.
- Input with a wide variety of content, which might depend on the purpose of the activity. For example, the content might be related to social needs (“party talk”), survival needs (how to read a bus schedule), academic needs (vocabulary needed to pass a standardized test), etc.
- Different media of delivery (e.g., textbooks, audio tape, the Internet, etc.).
- A variety of different tasks using the same input, which focus both on different language skills and on the integration of those skills, either together or at different time.
- Using learning strategies at both the macro level (telling students what they will be doing and why), and the micro level (techniques for learning vocabulary items) to facilitate learning.
- The creation of procedures which allow students to take some responsibility for their own learning.
- The use of different group sizes for different kinds of tasks, from whole class to small group to pair activities.

## Module 11: Individual Learner Differences

### **Video Segment #1, Observation Guide**

**[Read before viewing.]**

Gather the following information from this video segment.

1. Explain how the class is organized to work on the different activities.
2. List the four activities that students did with the song.
3. After each activity, list the skills students had to use to complete the activity. (Notice that not all of the skills are language skills.)
4. Explain the macro level strategy the teacher uses.

### **Reflection**

**[Read and answer after viewing.]**

1. Is this a large class or a small one? How is the class organized to do the activities? What might be some reasons for this organization? Do you think it was effective?
2. In pairs or small groups, compare your lists of activities and skills. Add to your list if you missed some. Share your reactions to the activities with your partner or group. Do you feel that one or two of the activities were better than the others in terms of language learning? In terms of affective behaviors that might affect language learning? Talk about some of the non-language skills. What is the purpose for including such skills in the language classroom.
3. What was the macro strategy the teacher used? Talk about it in your group. Was it necessary? Why did she do this? What was the main purpose of all these activities? What might be some secondary purposes?
4. The focus of this segment was on using different skills. Can you give examples of activities you use or one of your teachers has used that requires the use of different skills, not only different language skills but other kinds of skills?

### **Video Segment #2, Learning Stations and Self-access Rooms**

**[Read before viewing.]**

Another way to meet the needs of students with individual learning differences is to set up learning stations in a classroom or create an entire room for individual, independent study. Here are some reasons for self-access areas:

- Learners can have choices about what material they work with and what activities they do with that material.
- Learners can work at their own pace. If they need more time than other students, they can take it. If they work very fast, they can do more activities that interest them.
- Learners can have access to a variety of materials: spoken, written, and hands-on. They can then decide what activity they want to do with the materials.
- Learners work together in groups on something they want to do. Groups can even be formed around individual interests.
- Teachers can use the students' self-access period to work with individual students or groups.

This segment shows one entire room designed for student self-access or self-study, and a classroom with learning stations. Gather the following information from this video segment.

1. Explain the purpose of SEAR, the self-study center, and the student projects displayed there.
2. List the self-access areas you see or hear the teacher talk about, and some of the resources available in each. Notice the differences between them.
3. Describe what students are doing.

## Focus on the Learner

4. Try to find one or two techniques the teacher uses to enable students to take some responsibility for their own learning and for the learning areas.
5. Look for things that might increase learner motivation or that might make the learning more “real” to the students.

### Reflection

[Read and answer after viewing.]

1. Compare your lists with others in your group. What are some of the learning areas that you saw or heard described in the self-study center? In the special areas of the classroom? What activities were learners doing? Were the areas and activities appropriate to the age of the children in each setting? Explain your answer. Discuss what kinds of areas might be appropriate for your students.
2. What has the teacher done in the first room to help students be more self-directed? In your group, brainstorm some ideas for helping your students take some responsibility for their own procedures, classroom organization, and assignment completion.
3. What are some ways to create self-access areas in a classroom? What about in your classroom?
4. There are two motivational techniques displayed in the segment and one activity that is both motivational and makes learning more “real” for the students. What are they? In your situation, is it possible to move students outside the classroom? If so, what language activities might you organize around that?

### Summary Discussion

1. Look back at the focus points listed under the Module Focus. Did you see examples of each point while watching the video? What were they? Which ones, if any, do you believe you didn't see?
2. Do you believe that there are a lot of learner differences in your classroom? Looking back at the preview activity and the points made in this module, try to create learner profiles for your students.
3. After viewing this module, do you think you will try to vary the materials and activities in your lesson plans and procedures to better serve the learner differences in your class? Why or why not? If yes, what are you most likely to try?

### Now You Try It—An Action Plan

#### Step 1

You can read some of the articles on the topic of contextualizing language (see Module 11 Readings plus the List of Additional Readings and Resources in *Shaping the Way We Teach English: Readings and Resources*). Using the video, you have seen a few examples and ideas from other teachers' classes. Now, identify a lesson or class topic from your own course that you would like to teach with a focus on (greater attention to) individual learner differences.

#### Step 2

Working with a partner or in groups, brainstorm possible procedures, materials, and activities that might facilitate more effective learning in your classes. Create a plan.

#### Step 3

Share your plan with others. Get ideas and formative feedback.

#### Step 4

Change your plan, as needed. Try it with your class. If you are not teaching, ask the trainer or another experienced teacher for feedback.

# Module 11: Individual Learner Differences

## Answer Key to Module 11, Individual Learner Differences

Here are some suggested directions for answers to the questions for this module. Actual answers may vary depending on local context and the kinds of experience that viewers bring to the task of interpreting and applying video and text concepts.

### Module 11, Video Segment #1, Using Different Skills

1. This is a middle school class of about 45 students organized into large groups. Each group did a different activity related to the chosen song. They were able to work together, helping each other do the task. The teacher was able to work with each group at different times during the work session.

2. The groups performed or reported on four different activities:

- Prepare and perform a music video for the song (listening, discussion, drama).
- Write a story that has similarities to the song and tell it, and (listening, writing, speaking).
- Draw a picture about the song and explain it (listening, drawing, speaking).
- Change some words in the song and sing the new version (listening, reading, vocabulary).

By including artistic areas such as music, drawing, and drama, the teacher can lower affective barriers in the class, make the language learning tasks more enjoyable and motivating, and allow students with abilities in those areas to display those abilities and use them to enhance their language learning.

3. During the performances, the teacher used a macro strategy: She talked about what the purpose of these activities was (to learn vocabulary). She asked the students if the song made it easier to learn the vocabulary. Stopping to clarify the purpose of learning during a lesson helps those learners who need a purpose and those who learn better when given an overall picture. Besides vocabulary learning, such activities practice listening skills and fluency, while making learners feel more comfortable using the language, a comfort which some learners need to lower their anxiety levels.

### Module 11, Video Segment #2, Learning Stations and Self-access Rooms

1. The teacher (or “ajarn”) talks at length about in-depth projects that groups of students produce each year and then store in notebooks on shelves in the self-access room. Other students can read them and use them as models. The process is one they can transfer to other classes, such as science and biology, as well.

2. Here are some of the learning areas:

- Reading areas with tables or book carts (published books on different topics, resource material on shelves, student produced material for reading);
- Writing areas (not seen are worksheets with writing tasks);
- Audio and video listening stations (video and audio tapes);
- Displays of student projects, written work and models (written projects in notebooks, specific purpose language for telephoning posted on walls);
- Areas where students can work together on projects (resource material on shelves);
- An area for things that can be physically manipulated (brain puzzle, blocks, games, supplies in bins).

Many of the areas have instructions and schedules posted so students can self-monitor and help themselves.

## Focus on the Learner

3. Students are choosing and reading books that interest them from the table, working together on projects, and working individually with the teacher. The self-study room had a lot of materials for older students, with a focus on reading and writing. Models from this room, also featured in other parts of the video, are the sort of activity that appeals to students who learn better by doing things with their hands.

The learning stations toward the end of the segment are for younger children's interests. They included a lot of brightly colored supplies and objects that let students work with pictures, connecting pictures with words, and with their hands.

4. In the self-study room, there are instructions posted for how to use the listening area and equipment, and a schedule for use of the different areas that allows students to determine their own activities and amount of time working on them while using the room. Such techniques for self-monitoring and directing help students manage their own learning time – to learn at the pace that is most effective for them.

5. One motivational technique used in both classrooms is the posting and display of student work. Another is giving students the opportunity to choose material that interests them from a wide variety of available resources.

The final project, while seemingly simple on the surface (a hand-drawn chart with numbers of animals and bugs), uses an important venue for learning – the world outside the classroom. The younger children made regular observations in their neighborhoods, collected data (recorded numbers of animals and bugs seen), and made lists of and counted all the different animals they saw. At one of the work stations back in the classroom, they then combined all their collected information, formatted it into a bar chart (graph), and posted it on the wall. This was an authentic activity using information they collected in the “real” world. Such an activity integrates skills, promotes visual literacy (chart representation), fosters group work, and meets the needs of children who learn better through practical experience. Note that the vocabulary required to do this was simple. This is an activity that can work well for many topics or themes, and all age groups.

