

ESL TEACHERS CONCEPTS ABOUT INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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Abstract

The concept of individual differences is frequently discussed in social science disciplines like psychology and linguistics. In fact, individual Differences (IDs) form the basis of social sciences and make these disciplines distinct from natural sciences. In this quantitative study, the researchers try to explore existing literature on learners' psychology. The theoretical and conceptual framework of the study combines insights from personality psychology, differential psychology and Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Pakistani language teachers connected with urban higher education centers like universities and colleges may have better understanding and knowledge of the role of individual differences in language education. How do language teachers teaching in rural areas or smaller cities of the Punjab perceive individual differences? To answer this question, the current study which falls in the field of Applied Linguistics investigates perceptions of state-run school teachers of a small city in the Punjab about individual differences. The research was carried among English teachers of Mian Chanu. A questionnaire was designed by the researcher and, after piloting phase, it was used to collect data from the teachers. Most of the teachers (more than 60%) in the state-run schools of Mian Chanu are not only aware of the concept of individual differences but they also try to use this concept in their teaching practices.

Introduction

Life seems to be unthinkable without communication. Communication is an integral part of human life on the earth. Animals have their own ways of communications. According to linguists, human communication is far more sophisticated than communication in the world of animals. Human communicate in verbal and non-verbal ways. With regard to verbal communication, there are around 7000 languages spoken all over the globe (Ethnologue). Of all the language spoken across the globe, some languages have gained more importance than others with regard to wider and more frequent use in communication taking place in multi-ethnic global village. Existence, identity and variation go together not only in human world but also in realms beyond human world. As the surface earth is defined by geographical variations, human world is defined both by deeper psychological and rich physical variations. Each individual born to this world wears unique personality characteristics and traits. These unique traits or individual differences, according to linguists and psychologists, play important roles in his or her learning behavior. On the basis of these permanent personality traits, learners are unique individuals. Linguists argue that these stable traits of language learners should not be ignored in defining and designing the structure of language education. Therefore, teachers should consider, handle and manage these individual differences (IDs) before designing a language teaching plan and during delivering language lessons.

Human Psychology and Individual Differences

Human psychology contains immense variations and complexities. For instance, the finger prints of each single individual are unique in the entire history of humanity. Every individual has unique signature. The inner eye structure of every individual is different from others. Each individual is different from others in his or her physical , psychological, mental , material and spiritual experiences and behaviors. These personality traits serve as identity markers of individuals. Even twins born to the same mother are not alike. All these and other similar aspects refer to the existence of permanent personality characteristics or individual differences.

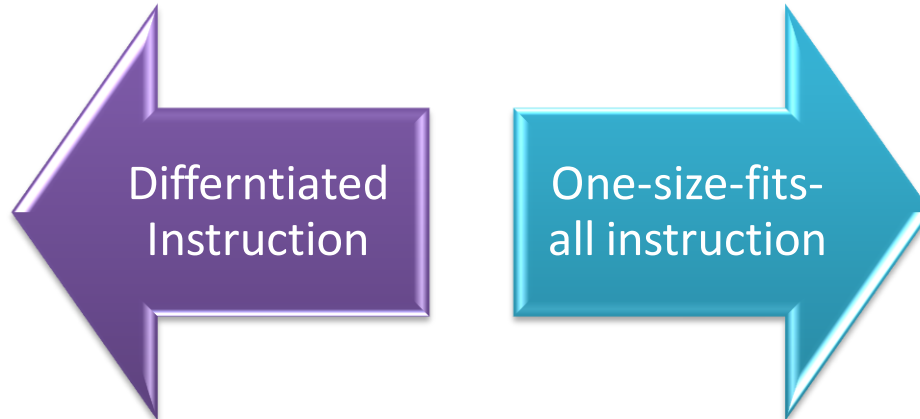
As it has already been mentioned, individual differences form the basis and foundation of social sciences. Anthropology, psychology, gender studies and other disciplines of social sciences deal with individual differences. In fact, individual differences separate social sciences from natural sciences. Natural science deals with physical world while social sciences deal with society and people . Linguistics is one of the social sciences. Linguists have given several discussions on the role of individual differences in language acquisition and learning. Linguists stress that language teachers should know about the individual differences of learners and accordingly they should tailor their teaching strategies. In modern era Pakistan, there is a need for knowing about newer and more useful teaching methods. The traditional methods of teaching are not adequate for achieving the desired language teaching and educational goals in digital modern age.

When education in the state-run schools of Pakistan is surveyed, it may be noticed that teaching practices are affected by various socio-economic factors. Teachers have to teach in difficult circumstances. They work in resource-constrained classes. They work in financial constraints and social and administrative pressures. Under these visible and invisible constraints and pressures, it may be observed that teachers even don't know the names of all their students . Besides, the names of the learners, knowing about deeper and permanent traits require longer and better association with learners. Such longer association requires teachers to be emotionally intelligent. But, under the above pressures, constraints and hectic professional engagements , teachers seem to believe that a single teaching method fits for all in the classroom. This preference for 'one-method-fit-for-all' strategy indicates that individual differences are ignored. The teacher should perceive the learner's psychological differences before planning and executing the lesson. They need to be confident enough that they can be successful by following student-oriented activities. Teacher should be on liberty to adopt the proper teaching methods on the basis of individual differences. .In addition to understanding psychology of the learners , they should be good at utilizing sights from different methods or teaching techniques.

A teaching method plays a vital role to achieve the required goal. Its upto the content that which teaching method should be used. If selection of method is according to the nature of subject then teacher and learner both are successful. Otherwise, it will prove to be a loss for the both. Different teaching methods and approaches are used to teach and clarify the concepts. Any method can be selected according to the nature and needs of the teaching setting. But the success of the method depends upon many factors such as the age, social and economic background of the learner, classroom environment, audio-visual aids, and so on. Therefore, the language teacher should have strong command over his/her subject. Furthermore, he should avoid using one-size-fits-all approach. He should

have ability to use insights of differentiated instruction which requires that the teacher should form flexible groups of learners for different activities and accordingly provide learning opportunities to learners. The following figure presents comparison of two contrary teaching approaches.

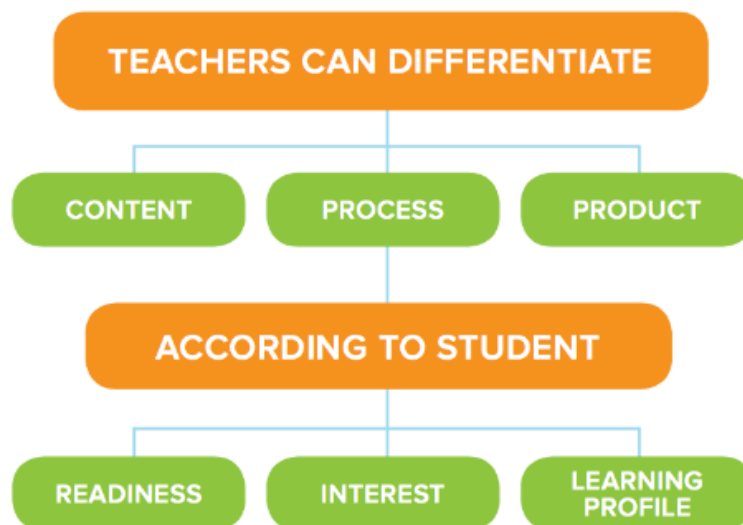
Figure 1. Comparison of two types of instruction



1.7 Differentiated Instruction

Learners have different psychological make-up and come from different culture and family background. All these biological, genetic, intellectual and cultural variations pose certain challenges for teachers. If these learners are large in numbers, then dealing with these aspects may become more difficult. But, it is natural for humans to find solutions of their problems. An approach to cater for students of different abilities is called differentiated instruction. It is helpful in growth and success of each student by meeting its individual needs. Tomlinson (2005) defines Differentiated instruction (DI) as a philosophy of teaching that is based on the premise that students learn best when their teachers accommodate the differences in their readiness levels, interests and learning profiles. The following figure shows how DI works:

Figure 1: Differentiated Instruction



Adapted from Tomlinson, C. A., & Imbeau, M. B. (2010).

Students move to different flexible groups for different activities according to their abilities. Lessons are designed according to group needs. Differentiated teaching should not be confused with individualized teaching. One is based on the needs of a group and the other is based on the needs of an individual. Individualized teaching can be used as a separate approach or it can be used as a part of the differentiated instruction. Special education frequently utilizes features of individualized instruction. So, differentiated instruction requires a better understanding of the needs of the learners. In all contexts, however, effective differentiated instruction involves;

1. Knowing your students
2. Understanding the curriculum
3. Providing multiple pathways to learning
4. Sharing responsibility with students
5. Taking a flexible and reflective approach
6. Meeting a range of students special needs

So, teachers' professional training and refresher courses should be arranged to keep them updated on changes in curriculum and teaching methods. Teachers should collaborate with parents in order to understand the differences. They should be loyal and devoted to fulfill the individual learners' needs. A flexible teaching method should be adopted. Overcrowded classes should be changed into ideal classes by decreasing the number of students. The teacher should be on liberty in choosing the teaching method and material for achievement of better results. An effective testing and examination method should be adopted for achievement of fair results.

1.9 Research Questions

- 1). How many English teachers in the state-run-schools of MianChanuare aware of the concept of individual differences?
- 2). What are English teachers' practices regarding the practical channelization and implementation of the concept of individual differences in MianChanu?

Literature Review

As it has already been mentioned that IDs form the foundation of social sciences and separate social sciences from natural sciences. So, experts of social sciences are concerned with IDs. Experts have used mining metaphor to explain the work of differential psychologists and experts of psychometrics. Differential psychologists is the person who surveys the land and identifies the ID to be measured or the part of the land to be drilled while psychometricians insert their mining shaft to actually measure IDs. Traditionally, psychologists and educationists measured only one individual difference: intelligence. In other words, in those days psychologists and educationists were sinking their mining shafts at one place only. So, they focused only on one ID and drilled for intelligence. Later research showed that there were variety of IDs and that one ID was linked to other IDs and that IDs could not be separated. It is hard to separate intelligence from personality. At the same time, all IDs are not important in all studies. For studies on linguistics, experts focus on relevant IDs such as cognitive abilities, emotional factors such as motivation and anxiety.

IDs & Language Learning

Human existence and human psychology may be likened to a an iceberg, so to speak. Physical aspects are the tip of the iceberg and psychological aspects are hidden from our naked eyes but they do exist. Linguists discuss role of IDs in L1 acquisition and L2 learning. In language learning, some learners make rapid gains while others make slow progress. Learners are distinctive in a number of ways such as intelligence, understanding, thinking, appearance, tendency, economic and social background, motives, creativity and coordination. Furthermore, there are some other forms of differences. These differences refer to gender, age, religion, language and culture. Besides, learners' weaknesses and disqualification are other aspect of diversity in a general classroom. Linguists design questionnaire tools to study IDs with regard to language learning. They try to predict success in language learning on the basis of learners' intelligence, motivation, anxiety , aptitude and age. Learners may have different learning strategies: visual , aural, kinesthetic and the like. The learners may vary in terms of extroversion and introversion. They may vary in terms of their motivation and identity. They may identify themselves with certain ethnic groups who have certain beliefs. Some of the most frequently examined characteristics which have strong relation to learners' abilities and academic achievements are motivation, self-strength, way of guidance and learning skill. There might be learners who have integrative motivation for language learning and there might be others who have instrumental motivation. With regard to motivation, there are two types of factors affecting motivation. On the one hand there are internal factors such as gender, age, ambition and attitude while confidence, expectation, awards and feedback by the instructor are external factors . Young learners can be motivated by competition and group work. Giving positive remarks and encouragement such as; 'Well done', 'Great' and 'Superb' infuse high amounts of motivation among learners. Furthermore, age can cause differences in learning outcome. This is why linguists have mentioned a certain critical period hypothesis. This hypothesis underlines the role of age in intellectual growth and learning. Linguists use proficiency tests and questionnaires to study IDs in language learning. They search for those IDs that influence learning process or outcomes. After several years of research, linguists, psychologists and educationists came up with their findings . They have enumerated IDs important from the point of view of language learning and acquisition. Their list cannot be taken as an exhaustive list or final word because newer findings may yield better insights in future. The following figure gives those IDs which are related to language learning:

Figure 3:IDs Relevant to Language Learning



Thus, intelligence, learning style, identity, motivation, aptitude and personality are some of IDs related to language learning. Actually, the same individual differences that apply to students also apply to teacher. Teachers differ in ability, subject knowledge, devotion, interest and teaching style.

Individual Differences & Language Teachers

Teacher should have knowledge of psychology. He should be able to understand learners' mental level and personal preferences. Teacher should also be very much aware of the individual differences and care for each student as a learner. Unfortunately, the teaching methods and strategies adopted by language teachers in Pakistan do not seem to take into account the individual differences of the learners. Most commonly used teaching method is lecturing or chalk and talk. It is because the teachers are either not trained or they don't have awareness the needs of the learners. They appear to assume that traditional method of teaching is appropriate for all students regardless of their diversity. Lecture-based teaching facilitates only to gifted or high achiever students rather than catering the learning needs of average and below average students. The topic of teacher competence has achieved prevalence all over the world, particularly with the shift from quantity to quality. Quality of education is mainly relying on what teachers teach the learners in the classroom. This is predetermined because a teacher is an incharge, a director, manager and determiner of overall design of the lessons.

How can a Teacher know about Learners' IDs

For preparation of a plan to hold differences the following elements will help a teacher such as:

- 1: Parents Teacher meeting
- 2: Social events
- 3: Observing learners' behavior with their class mates
- 4: Cooperation in class

These points show importance of observation and interaction on the part of the teacher. Through these steps , a teacher can acquaint himself or herself with the IDs of his learners. A child can learn the best if there is a combination of a skillful teacher with social interaction. These view lead the discussion to Constructivist views of child being a creative being.

Gap in the Existing Literature on Individual Differences

Akhtar and Kausar(2011) studied Pakistani students' and teachers' beliefs about English language learning at school level. They carried out their study in two schools of Islamabad: one a private school (Shaheen School System) and other a Government school (F.G. Girls Model School) . They argue that teachers and learners both are very crucial in language learning. So, the goals of the learning process can have a great effect if there is any clash between the two. The researchers analyzed Pakistani teachers' and students' beliefs regarding learning. They have discussed the similarities and differences among learners. The purpose of the study was to bring into light teachers' and students' beliefs' of learning and their differences. They used questionnaire and interviews and found out similarities and differences in their opinions about English language learning. So, this study involved studying the beliefs of teachers about English teaching and learning. Thus looking at teachers' mind regarding language teaching tasks is important. A similar study has been done by Samimy and Lee (1997) who studied 34 students and 10 teachers to look at agreement or disagreement between their language learning beliefs. Ahmad (2014) worked on role of extroversion and introversion in L2 learning. He also studied learners from the perspective of extroversion and introversion. Kanya(2014)studied teachers' efficacy in handling Individual Differences on language achievement of Pre-scholars in Kajiado North County, Kenya. She analyzed the effects of teaches' competence in handling Individual Differences on English language achievement . She wanted to observe teachers' management of psychological variations in the classrooms. She took the sample of the study from 17 pre-school head teachers and 34 pre-school class teachers. A questionnaire was used as a research instrument for data collection. She also used observation schedule to observe the classroom processes. It is proved by collected data that teachers' efficacy had a great effect on learning. Moreover, the study concluded that teachers' academic and professional qualifications and proper trainings were very important. There was a need to keep the teachers updated regarding curriculum and teaching methods. So refresher courses were recommended to cater for learners' individual differences and to meet the needs of modern era. Findings also revealed the fact that the trained teaching staff had lesson plans which made their teaching effective and they could easily cater for individual learner needs. While on the other hand 'untrained teachers had no lesson plans and schemes of work. She mentions that collaboration between teachers and parents is proved beneficial in understanding learners differences. And a teacher should try hard to understand the learners' differences, in order to put them together while teaching.

Research Methodology

The purpose of the current study was to investigate state-run teachers' perceptions about individual differences of learners. The study was an attempt to explore teachers' knowledge, perceptions and views about psychological variations among language learners. For the realization of this purpose, the current research was conducted. The current descriptive study followed an exploratory research design. In order to get answers of these questions for the current descriptive study, the researchers used a survey technique called questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed by the researchers. It was revised through a pilot study. Schaller (2010), explains that 'the population that the researchers wish to generalize to is the theoretical population'. He further explains that 'the population that the researcher can gain access to is the study population' (p.13).

(Theoretical) population of the Study

1. All the English language teachers teaching small towns of the Punjab in the state-run schools

(Accessible) Populations of the Study

1. All the English language teachers teaching in the state-run schools of MianChanu

Data Analysis

After collecting the questionnaires, the researcher checked through the responses and of the instrument very carefully. The data collected was coded by classifying the responses into categories and was presented in charts. Data analysis of the current study was done in terms of frequencies with the help of MS Excel. It was analyzed by using frequencies and percentage. At the end, all responses were interpreted and conclusion was drawn.

Sample & Participants

The questionnaire-based survey was conducted in government Middle schools of MianChanu, Pakistan. Both male and female English language, with MA English qualification, participated in this research. The analysis of the data presents responses of 30 teachers. Some of them were new in this field while others were experienced. But no one was having less than a year experience. They all were of different age and gender. The participants teach students of class 4 to class 8. A sample is a selected part of the available population that represent the whole. State-run schools of MianChanu and their 30 English teachers were selected randomly as a sample in this study.

Data Analysis

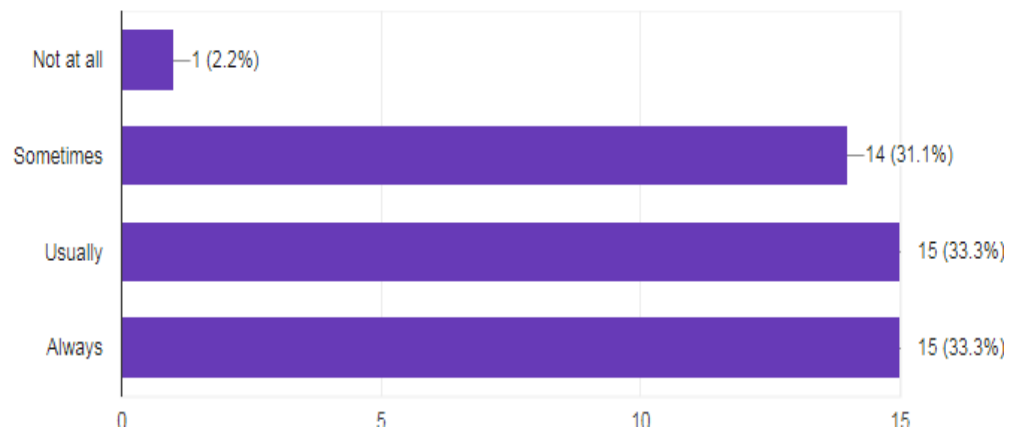
Data analysis for the current study was done in the following way: editing of the questionnaire, responses were assigned codes, frequencies were measured, frequencies were shown in charts and graphs and then data results were interpreted.

Q.1. Do you consider individual differences of learners when planning English lessons?

The first question of the questionnaire asked teachers about their pedagogical planning. The following figure shows that the teachers do consider individual differences when planning English lessons. Instead of explaining each bar separately, the researcher has

joined and combined thematically similar categories for the sake of convenience in interpretation. 97% of the respondents opined that they considered learners' IDs while planning English lessons. There are, however, differences in degree of considering IDs. 66% of the respondents consider it usually and always, while 31 % consider it sometime. 2% of the respondents don't consider IDs when planning English lessons. These findings are interesting because they show rural-side teachers' knowledge about individual differences.

Figure 4: Considering IDs while planning Lessons



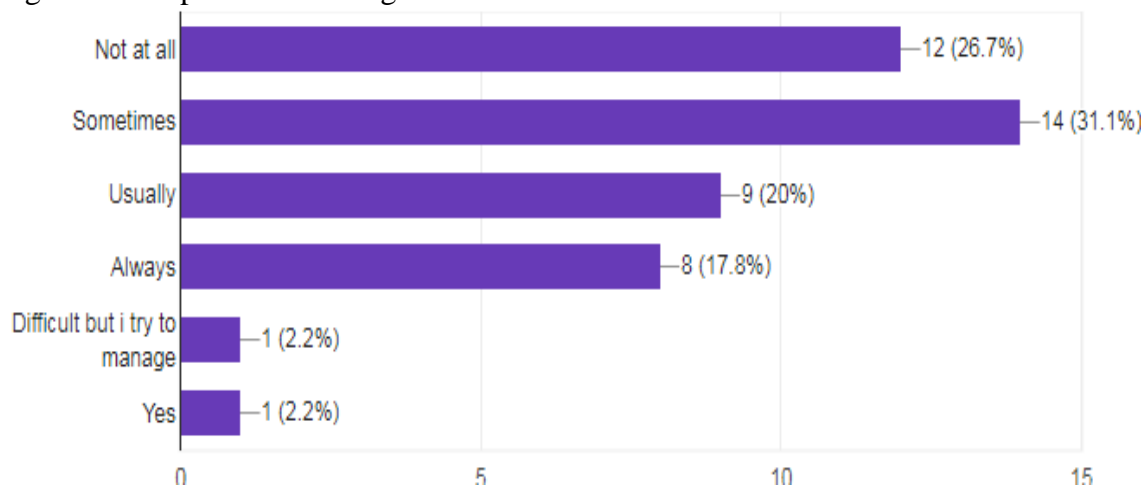
These statistics show encouraging signs of all-embracing planning on the part of the teachers. 66% of the teachers try to channelize their knowledge of individual differences in their planning of language teaching. The next question asked the respondents about a similar area of differential and varied learner-based language teaching. These statistics show that teachers in MianChanu are trying to facilitate learners psychologically and emotionally. Emotional intelligence helps teachers understand themselves and understand their teachers. With emotional intelligence, teachers can empathize with learners. Emotionally intelligent teachers can manage individual differences of the learners more effectively than teachers with low emotional intelligence. Teachers working in rural areas need to exercise greater emotional intelligence because they have to teach learners to study English in difficult circumstances.

Q.2. Is it possible in a large class to cater for individual differences?

Large classes are usually perceived as challenges. But, large classes can yield opportunities for growth of the teaching skills. Large classes broaden teachers experiences and skills. Teachers have their own levels of expectations regarding teaching challenges and faculties. There are different views on whether large class and teaching quality correlate or not. What do teachers think about large classes? This was an important question which asked the respondents about their general opinion on the possibility of catering for psychological variations of learners in crowded classes because when teacher is surrounded with a large number of students, it may be difficult for him to pay attention to all students. 39% of the respondents think that it is usually possible to cater for IDs of learners in crowded classes. 31% of the respondents think that it is occasionally possible. Around 27% of the respondents think that it is not possible to carry out such a teaching in large classes. Instead of explaining each bar separately, the

researcher has joined and combined thematically similar categories for the sake of convenience in interpretation.

Figure 5: Is it possible in a large class to cater for individual differences?

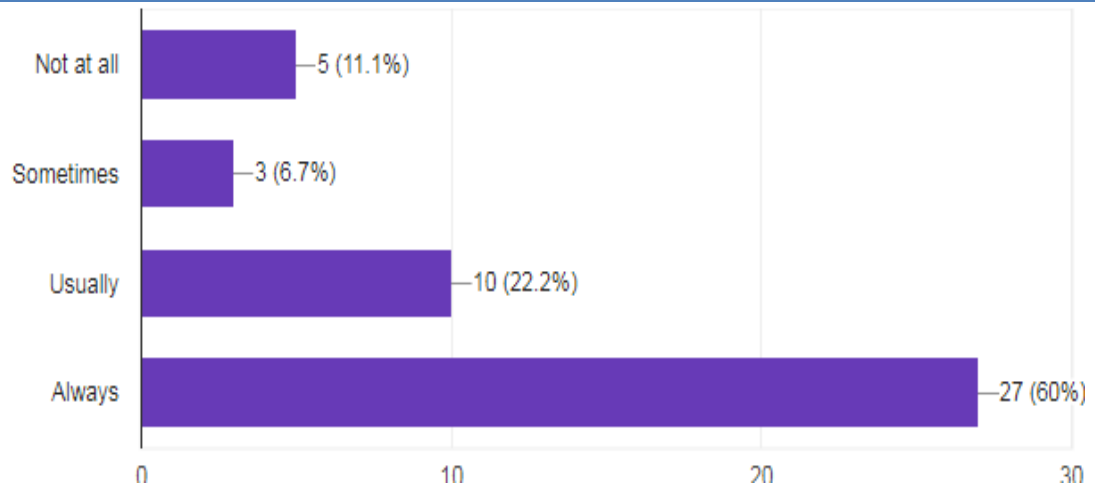


This figure yields important information regarding English language teachers' perceptions about individual differences of the learners. The next question asked the respondents about a similar area of differential and varied learner-based language teaching. The next question asked the participants about the behavior of the learners.

Q.3. Do you treat with respect learners' cultural identity?

Since the current study was on individual differences, it asked the respondents about a wide-range of individual differences such as learners' families, cultural and social backgrounds and the like. Models in Applied Linguistics stress that learners' cultural identity is important in defining their attitude towards ESL or EFL. Cultural identity of the learners should be acknowledged and treated with respect. In this context, this question was asked. Cultural identity is one of the IDs. Instead of explaining each bar separately, the researcher has joined and combined thematically similar categories for the sake of convenience in interpretation. 82% of the respondents say that they treat learners' identity with respect. The rest of the respondents are struggling in giving importance to this individual difference among learners.

Figure 6.: Do you treat with respect learners' cultural identity?

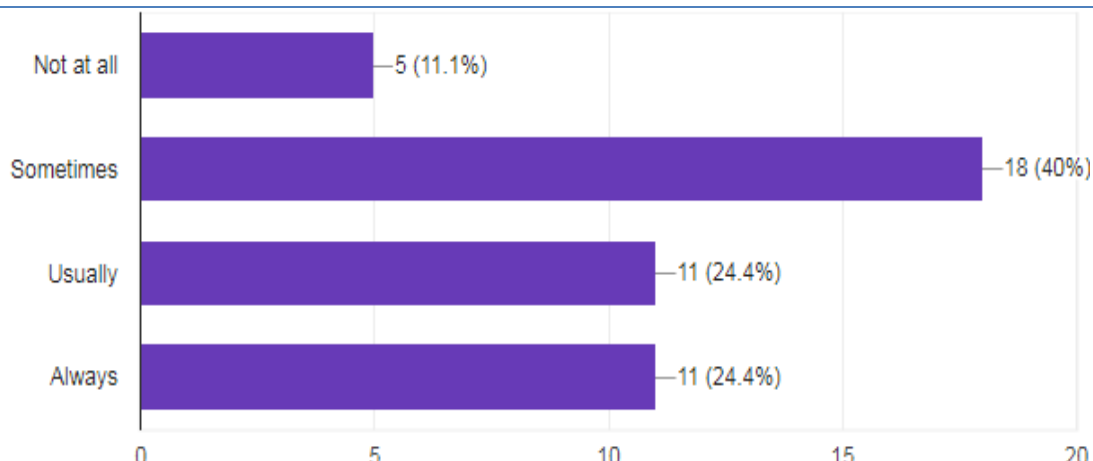


This figure yields important information regarding English language teachers' perceptions about individual differences of the learners. Pakistan is a multilingual country and so is the Punjab. This study was conducted in the southern Punjab where learners belong to multiple cultural backgrounds. Linguistic and cultural variations are integral parts of larger schemes of things working in this universe. There is no linguistic or scientific evidence why a certain culture or language or a family should be treated as superior and others as inferior. A teacher should be free from regional and cultural biases. Treating learners and the learners' identity with respect boosts the confidence of the learners.

Q. 4. Do you ask learners' opinion before making any decision regarding your teaching mode?

Giving importance to learners' view or making teaching learner-centered is important. Learner-centered-teaching requires that teachers should give importance to learners' views, perceptions, preferences, learning styles and strategies. 49% of the respondents know the opinion of learners before taking any decision regarding their teaching. 51% of the respondents are struggling in this area. Out of 51% of the respondents, 11% of the respondents don't ask learners in making decisions about their teaching input. This figure yields important information regarding English language teachers' perceptions about individual differences of the learners.

Figure 7 Do you ask learners' opinion before making any decision regarding your teaching mode?

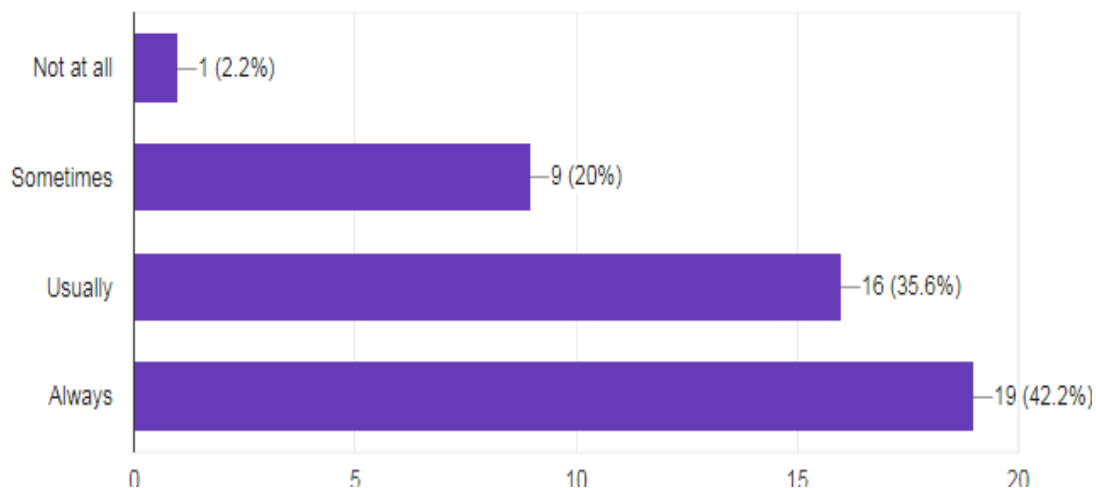


These statistics show that there is a need for working in this area of giving importance to learners' views and perceptions. A teacher should choose teaching mode in accordance with preferred learning strategies and styles of the learners. This figure yields important information regarding English language teachers' perceptions about individual differences of the learners. Learners are human beings and human beings construct meanings through interaction and experiences. It is not the books which can be source of language learning alone. A teacher can be a source of knowledge for a learner. Moreover, language learning requires regular interaction between learner and teacher and performance of the knowledge learners have already acquired.

Q 5. Do you give importance to individual needs of the learners?

Giving importance to the individual needs of the learners is important. Learners have their own needs when they come to formal language learning setting. A good teacher should find time to pay attention to the individual needs of the learners. Instead of explaining each bar separately, the researcher has joined and combined thematically similar categories for the sake of convenience in interpretation. Around 78% of the respondents give importance to the individual needs of the learners. 20% of the respondents occasionally pay attention to the individual needs of the learners. 2% of the respondents admit that they don't pay attention to the individual needs of the learners.

Figure 8: Do you give importance to individual needs of the learners?

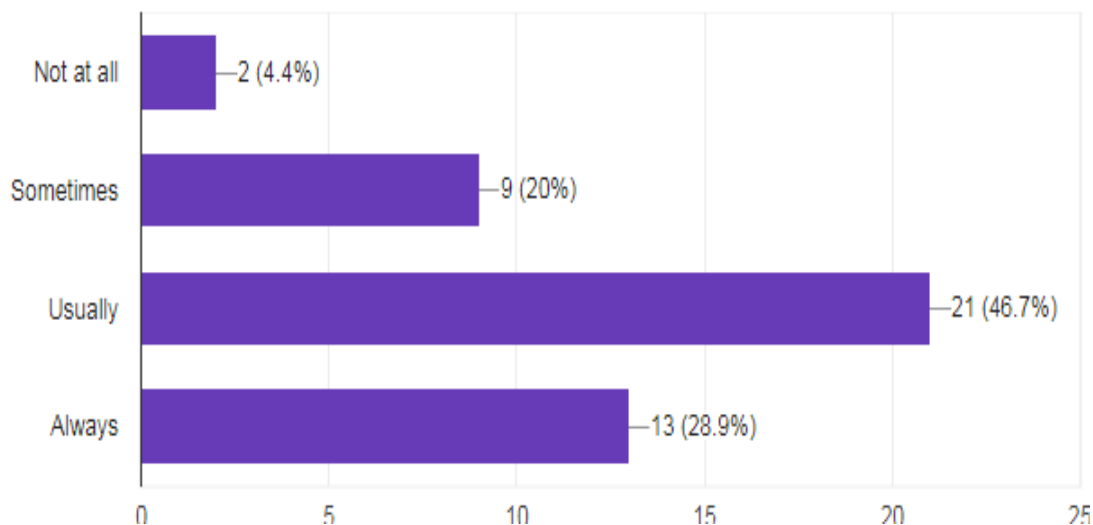


Statistics show that respondents need to focus on knowing learners opinion in deciding mode of teaching, figure 4.17 shows that respondents give importance to the individualized needs of the learners. This figure yields important information regarding English language teachers' perceptions about individual differences of the learners.

Q. 6. Do you give choices according to the caliber of students to complete the activities?

Giving choices is very important. Having power to choose means having power in life. A teacher should give choices to his or her learners. Instead of explaining each bar separately, the researcher has joined and combined thematically similar categories for the sake of convenience in interpretation. 76% of the respondents claim that they give choices to learner in the tasks assigned to them . 20% of the respondents opine that they occasionally give choices to learners. 4% of the respondents don't give choices to learners.

Figure 9: Do you give choices according to the caliber of students to complete the activities?



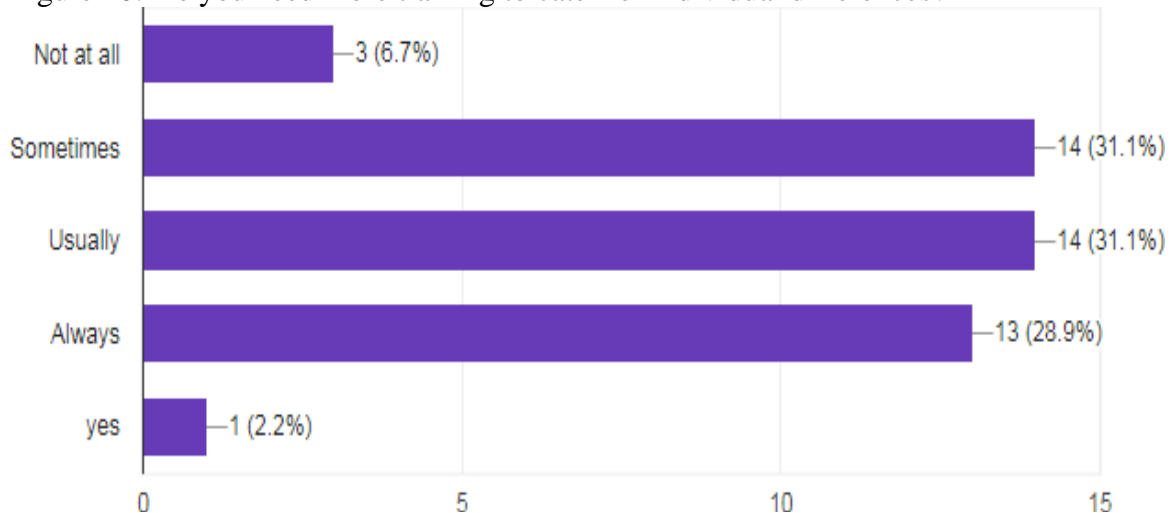
These statistics show that teachers in MianChanu are trying to facilitate learners psychologically and emotionally. Emotional intelligence helps teachers understand themselves and understand their teachers. With emotional intelligence, teachers can empathize with learners. Emotionally intelligent teachers can manage individual differences of the learners more effectively than teachers with low emotional intelligence. Teachers working in rural areas need to exercise greater emotional intelligence because they have to teach learners to study English in difficult circumstances.

Q.7. Do you need more training to cater for individual differences?

Education, Understanding and knowledge are large domains and there is always room for improvement. Training and improving ones skills are important and they are always needed for further growth. 60% of the respondents opine that they need training for

further improvement and better management of learners' IDs. Instead of explaining each bar separately, the researcher has joined and combined thematically similar categories for the sake of convenience in interpretation. 31% of the respondents say they occasionally need such trainings. 31% of the respondents are of the view that they usually need such trainings. So, it means 62% of the respondents need trainings sometimes or usually. 29% of the respondents think that they always need trainings. 7% of the respondents say they don't need trainings.

Figure 10: Do you need more training to cater for individual differences?



Conclusion

Most of the teachers (more than 60%) in the state-run-schools of MianChanun are not only aware of the concept of individual differences but they also try to use this concept in their teaching practices. Their responses show that English teachers in MianChanu give importance to learners' IDs in their daily teaching practices. They try to know about learners' social, cultural and familial background. The results show that most of the teachers try to use insights from differential psychology in their everyday teaching practices. These answers also show that teachers try to be emotionally, socially, culturally and educationally responsive in dealing with the learners. This conclusion seems to be surprising keeping in mind that MianChanu is not a big city. In fact, teachers from this city are taking part in research being done in bigger cities like Lahore, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Multan and Bahawalpur. Moreover, the Government of the Punjab is taking steps to improve educational standards at school level. This awareness among English teachers of MianChanu should be seen against a background of these efforts made by teachers themselves and the government.

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