Individual variables influence learning in any setting, whether in classrooms or, as for readers of this book, in one-to-one lessons. Individual differences include the long-term variable of cultural background and the changing variable of age as well as the complex concept referred to as motivation.

When considering all the factors at play in one-to-one language learning, it is not easy to know where to make distinctions. For example should we consider autonomy as one aspect of motivation since “both are centrally concerned with the learner’s active engagement with and involvement in the learning process” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 58)? For the purposes of this chapter, we explore autonomy and motivation separately, but we also explore the roles of age, language distance (or the degree that the first and target language differ), and the multilingual learner. Following each brief summary of theory we make practical suggestions about how this factor might affect a one-to-one lesson.

In this chapter, we consider questions like:

• How does one help a learner to become more autonomous?
• Are young learners better at languages? What strengths do adults bring to language learning?
• How might a multilingual learner differ from someone learning a new language for the first time?
Autonomy

Your Turn

Before reading on, what role do you think learner autonomy plays in successful one-on-one language learning?

Autonomy in language learning means some control being taken by the learner. The concept of students taking some responsibility for their own learning has a long history (Schmenk, 2005) and, not surprisingly, “the term autonomy has acquired many different shades of meaning, which have sometimes caused confusion” (Aoki, 1999, p. 142). Little (2000) points to the 1979 introduction of the term in relation to language teaching and learning by Henri Holec in a Council of Europe publication. Rubin and Thompson (1994), in their book How to be a more successful language learner, used such learner-centered messages as “Everything depends on you” (p. 3) and “Take charge of your learning” (p. 59). According to Benson (2011), autonomous learners are “more effective” language learners than those who turn to a teacher for direction (p. 17). The idea of a student taking charge of the learning process is also called self-regulation.

Of course, the seriously autonomous language learner may not have a tutor at all, but turn rather to one of the many supports available for self-study such as online programs and books with technology support. In this book, however, we are considering the case of language learners who do want a tutor, either for all their learning or to supplement these other sources.

Barriers to autonomy

It might seem that the main barrier to learner autonomy is the teacher’s wish to remain in control, which is often the case. However, could it be that teachers want students to take charge more so that they (the teachers) carry less responsibility? La Ganza (2008) believes that the teacher–student relationship is quite variable. His Australian study suggested that a particular learner might find it easier to be autonomous with one teacher than with another and that the term “learner autonomy” describes only one side of the dynamic relationship. As we saw in the previous chapter, the matching up of a learner with an appropriate tutor is one of the keys to successful one-on-one learning.