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Aware learners and flexible teachers –  
Improving second language learning processes

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Do you think that there is such a thing as a '*good* language learner'? To what extent do you think that it is possible for people to become 'better' language learners? Discuss with reference to your own students, past or present.

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excluding footnotes, long quotes and references

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## 1 Introduction

When I went to grammar school, I was bad at maths. My teachers said it, my marks confirmed it and my mum wailed, "It runs in the family." My being 'slow' at maths became an unquestionable fact, notwithstanding my 'uncanny' ability to solve the little symbols-for-numbers puzzles in the Sunday paper. – Years later I helped my son (a 'bad' maths student, of course!) solve one of those algebra horrors of my own schooldays, astonished how easy it now seemed, and it dawned on me that learning might not all be about teachers, marks and family genes.

Today my students tell me how 'bad' they are at learning languages, and learning circumstances have become all-important. With a few exceptions, all of us have once successfully acquired our first language – why then is learning another one such an effort to most? With second language learning becoming a worldwide standard and a compulsory element in educational curricula, making languages easily accessible to everyone seems crucial. Are the only 'good' language learners those with a natural talent for 'picking up' languages, or are there ways for everyone to become a 'better' learner?

In my essay I will discuss that there are no essentially 'good' or 'bad' second language learners but that learners can – to a certain extent – become 'better' learners. To this end I will compare first and second language acquisition and present various factors affecting the language learning process: learner age, individual learner types and strategies and the learner's social environment. I will briefly analyze these factors in three case studies and demonstrate how they may affect proficiency assessment and classroom work. My goal is to show that on the basis of this knowledge learners and teachers together may discover ways to change and improve the individual learning process.

## 2 Everybody is a good language learner:

### First language acquisition

As a rule, everybody has managed to acquire one language even before starting school, at least to the extent of fluency in oral communication. Studies in child bilingualism show that even learning two (or more) languages simultaneously is rewarding rather than problematic (Kielhöfer and Jonekeit,

1983, and Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Few people will remember having had significant problems learning their mother tongue, and most would probably say they learned it 'automatically'. Therefore, if second (or third) language learners later report various difficulties, a comparison between first and second language acquisition processes suggests itself. Research in this direction has been done for decades, but results have been controversial to these days.

## **2.1 Psychological theories**

Research history shows that different psychological theories underlie the explanations of first language acquisition. Lightbown and Spada (2006) and Brown (2007) describe the following theories.

The **behaviourist theory**, born in the 1950s, claims that children imitate and practice what they hear, reinforce knowledge through positive feedback and form 'habits' of correct language use, the environment being their most important source. More recent studies, however, show that children do not necessarily imitate what is available but select new elements in reach of their understanding (Lightbown and Spada, 2006).

Since complex grammar cannot be learned in the way suggested by behaviourism, the **innatist perspective** or **nativist approach** assumes the existence of a biologically programmed, innate mechanism for language development based on input, with a universal understanding of grammar (UG), which also determines at which age certain skills are acquired (Lightbown and Spada, 2006).

**Parallel distributed processing (PDP)** describes the brain's simultaneous processing of what is actually being learned as well as of background experiences relevant to this (Brown, 2007), while **connectionism** focusses on the association of available language elements, comparing language acquisition to other cognitive learning processes (Lightbown and Spada, 2006).

**Functional approaches**, as e.g. **constructivist** and **interactionist perspectives**, see an interplay of innate learning mechanisms and interaction with the environment. Lightbown and Spada (2006) present two models: Piaget's (1951, 1946), describing language as a symbol system developed in childhood

and expressing knowledge acquired through interaction, and Vygotsky's (1978), regarding thought as internalized speech brought out by social interaction.

## **2.2 Linguistic and cognitive stages**

Studies of first language learners suggest several linguistic stages during pre-school years. Lightbown and Spada (2006) describe the 'creative combination' of a growing number of words and 'imperfect imitation' of input and relate the different stages to cognitive development. Children learn functions before grammatical structures, (partly) consistent with their understanding of certain concepts like negation, time, manner, etc. However, faced with new structures or stress situations they may fall back into old habits.

By exploring language in an ever-widening social context, especially during the school years, children develop metalinguistic awareness and understand the reasons for grammatical variety, while the reading of various types of text provides them with additional vocabulary (Lightbown and Spada, 2006).

Brown (2007) points out that from the age of two lateralization, i.e. the differentiation of the functions of the brain hemispheres, may affect language learning. While intellectual, logical and analytical functions are developed in the left hemisphere, the right hemisphere is reserved to social and emotional needs. This process is generally agreed to be completed before or at the age of puberty.

## **3 Different parameters in second language learning**

Note: I will follow Mitchell and Myles's (2001) definition of the term 'second language learning', i.e. all language learning taking place later than mother tongue acquisition, including third and further languages as well as 'foreign' language learning in a non-L2 environment. Although learning goals and environments may differ, roughly the same learning processes are involved (Mitchell and Myles, 2001). I will differentiate where appropriate ( $\rightarrow$  cf. section 3.4).

### **3.1 General issues**

If first language acquisition is so easy, reproducing its learning circumstances in second language learning must be the answer, innatists reasoned thirty years ago. However, Mitchell and Myles (2001) point out the social and psychological difficulties unheeded by this view. Exposing flaws and misunderstandings in the equating of first and second language acquisition, Brown (2007, p.55) disillusiones "the foreign language teacher's dream" of the first language learner.

As Brown (2007) points out, the greatest problem in comparing first and second language acquisition are the different starting ages and, consequently, the differences in cognitive, affective and physical development. Continual changes in the learner's physical and social environment and other aspects like personal goals and motivation are likely to affect second language learning. However, these factors may at the same time provide aware learners and teachers with opportunities to improve the learning process.

### **3.2 Age**

#### **3.2.1 Cognitive developments**

Cognitive development and language learning are closely related, and with many cognitive abilities fully developed at school age or adolescence, implicit language learning, i.e. learning without intention and awareness, may become increasingly difficult or impossible (Brown 2007). Although some studies recommend caution and differentiation with regard to the **Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)** (Birdsong and Molis, 2001), many researchers agree upon puberty being a critical period in first and second language learning, after which certain abilities required for implicit learning are no longer available to most learners. Brown (2007) considers 'authentic' pronunciation, i.e. a native-like accent, a significant aspect. Other studies provide evidence that the critical period may affect other linguistic abilities as well (Lightbown and Spada, 2001).

However, with brain lateralization completed at the age of puberty, the intellectual and analytical functions of the now dominant left hemisphere enable explicit language learning – e.g., focussing on form –, while emotional and social awareness, developing in the right hemisphere, are probably involved in more

complex language processing (Brown, 2007). While the knowledge about age-related loss of certain capacities is apt to put expectations about learners' performance into perspective, awareness of later cognitive developments may lead to differentiated teaching approaches (→ *cf. section 6*) and thus to more learning success.

### **3.2.2 Affective developments**

Most language teachers will have met extroverted learners willing to communicate, and others shy and inhibited but nevertheless performing well in writing. Brown (2007) ascribes these phenomena to personality varieties influencing second language acquisition. Self-esteem, stable in adult learners, may lead to self-efficacy, thus enabling even unsuccessful learners to 'make an effort' where less self-assured learners might give up. Self-esteem is closely related to willingness to communicate and take risks, all being characteristics of successful language learning.

On the other hand, anxiety, as individual predisposition or as situational factor – e.g., learners feeling incapable of expressing themselves appropriately in L2 –, may result in inhibition and reservedness. Children usually develop acute self-awareness and fear of self-exposure during puberty, often causing them extreme anxiety in the classroom (Brown 2007). Krashen's (1985) 'affective filter hypothesis' describes failure caused by language input being 'filtered out' by tense and anxious learners. In the classroom, teachers may relieve and encourage learners (→ *cf. section 6*), thus facilitating and improving the learning process.

### **3.3 The learner as individual**

Apart from the general or group-related aspects described in section 3.2, learners' must above all be seen as individuals whose unique capacities are involved in the learning process. The extent to which learners' individual characteristics, abilities and strategies are taken account of in the classroom (→ *cf. section 6*) may determine their degree of success.

### 3.3.1 Learner types and styles

Individual learning abilities have been categorized in different ways, some of which are represented here; however, any categorization can only serve as a general guideline to sensitize teachers and learners for the possible causes of individual strengths or weaknesses.

Puchta and Rinvoluceri (2005) support Gardner's (1983) theory of **Multiple Intelligences (MI)**, distinguishing between seven 'intelligences' characterized by different skills: 'intrapersonal' (self-awareness, an ability to abstract oneself); 'interpersonal' (awareness of the emotions of others); 'logical-mathematical' ('scientific thinking', perception); 'linguistic' (recognizing relationships between form and content); 'musical' (associating learning with sound); 'spatial' (visual or multi-sensory perception); and 'kinaesthetic bodily' (skilfully using one's body or objects). Some of these intelligences are also mentioned by Brown (2007) and included in Lightbown and Spada's (2006) category of 'intelligence', besides their other categories 'aptitude', 'learning styles', 'personality', 'motivation', 'identity', 'learner beliefs' and 'age'.

Lightbown and Spada's (2006) category of 'learning styles' also includes the concept of **Field Independence-Dependence (FID)**, explained by Brown (2007): FID describes the ability to perceive an individual item within a surrounding frame or 'field'. Field independent (FI) learners are able to discern particular objects (visually or aurally) without regard to their surroundings, at worst developing 'tunnel vision' (an inability to see the whole picture), whereas field dependent (FD) learners have a more holistic view but may overlook important detail. Both are relevant to language learning, the more so as FID becomes more distinctive with age.

Whether predominant capacity or blend of skills, the diversity of individual learner characteristics offers numerous possibilities to exploit learners' strengths and develop less dominant abilities, thus improving the learning process.

### 3.3.2 Learner strategies

According to Brown (2007), every language learner has a repertoire of varying strategies or techniques to deal with tasks. Learning strategies to process language input are a) metacognitive strategies: planning ahead,



understanding and consciously monitoring and evaluating learning processes, and b) cognitive strategies: task-orientated, conscious and variegated use of materials. Communication strategies are the application of mechanisms needed to produce language output, including avoidance and compensation strategies (e.g., avoiding L2 use or 'chunking' and requesting help). Brown (2007) also includes socioaffective strategies involving interaction with others.

Although studies on the influence of prior learning experience on learner strategies are scanty, Lightbown and Spada (2001) ascribe prior experience great influence on learners' assumptions about learning processes. Yorio's (1986) survey of international university students who, after previous experience of form-focussed, teacher-centred instruction, were dissatisfied with a predominantly learner-centred programme, is a good example of learners' beliefs affecting their choice of strategies. However, Lightbown and Spada (2001) also see learners' possibilities to become more flexible in their strategies.

With assistance from the teacher, learners may become aware of their strategies, increase their range and adapt them to the task and to their abilities to achieve better results.

### ***3.4 The learner as social being***

General and individual learner characteristics aside, Mitchell and Myles (2001, p.25) consider "the individual learners' relationship with the 'sociocultural milieu' in which learning is taking place". Since language is a medium for the exchange of thought, language development is only possible through social interaction (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). The **zone of proximal development (ZPD)** is a sociocultural concept describing learners' advance through collaboration with, and feedback from, any interlocutor at an equal level of proficiency or slightly above (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Kleppin (2002) describes the interesting model of 'tandem' and 'e-tandem' learning, i.e. interactive (distance) learning with an L1 partner, with meaningful communication and frequent L2 use.

When learning takes place in an L1 environment, group behaviour and classroom dynamics are particularly important. Group identity or pressure,

disturbances or an atmosphere of resentment, rivalry or subordination may substantially influence the learning process (Kleppin, 2002).

In a cross-cultural, L2 environment, additional aspects are involved. In this context Brown's (2007, pp.189-190) statement is particularly true:

It is apparent that culture, as an ingrained set of behaviours and modes of perception, becomes highly important in the learning of a second language. A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language ... is also the acquisition of a second culture.

According to Brown (2007), learners' attitude towards their own culture and that of their environment are crucial for their motivation. Feeling inferior or superior to the L2 culture group and thus resenting it (and vice versa), or experiencing culture shock and identity loss may lead to a social distance between learners and the L2 group and, consequently, negative learning outcome. Studies show that a positive attitude will boost learners' motivation and thus their willingness and ability to cope with difficulties (Brown, 2007). Kleppin (2002) also mentions learners' lack of self-esteem due to their inability to fully express themselves in an L2 environment, or learners' attitude being affected by their professional situation and social standing in the new environment.

With motivation being a key factor in language learning, these sociocultural aspects have to be taken into account, as they may directly influence learning success.

## **4 Three case studies**

In the following sections I will describe three students to demonstrate how cognitive and affective development and learner characteristics influence their individual learning processes, and to show how various degrees of success can be achieved through learners' awareness, group interaction and flexible attendance to individual needs.

The learners presented are adult students of English in Germany, native speakers of German. Karen and Annemarie are currently attending my evening class, while Helmut is studying with me in a one-to-one situation<sup>1</sup>.

### **4.1 Karen, a helping granny**

Karen (63) joined the course five years ago "to help her grandson with his school English". Although her only prior experience was autodidactic – translating and doing grammar exercises –, Karen made it clear that she expected teacher-centred instruction, with frequent grammar explanation and correction. Her attempts at 'reforming' the course met resistance from the creative and independently working group, and she slowly adjusted to my predominantly communicative approach but is really happy only when focussing on form, translating texts or reading audio transcripts. Having realized that keeping up with her grandson is impossible (as I had warned her), she now enjoys being part of the group. Her motivation received a boost when she found romance in Malta, where she now travels regularly.

At first Karen seemed to be a 'bad' learner: her comprehension skills were poor and her pronunciation incomprehensible through teaching herself from the textbook, while her beliefs about learning – clashing with those of the group and myself – and her 'bad habits' through lack of interaction were obstacles to progress. However, her outgoing personality and her ability to come to compromises and accept new strategies to some extent have helped Karen to modestly improve her communicative competence and to become, within her scope, a 'better' learner, motivated by her goals (helping her grandchild; social contact with her peers; communicating abroad) and frequently interacting with L2 speakers.

### **4.2 Helmut, a pioneering manager**

Helmut (39) is a mechanical engineer working in the management of a car manufacturer, who needs to be fluent in spoken and written English to build up a new plant in Tennessee next year. At grammar school he had preferred Latin to English "because of its clearer structure", and although he is able to recite and

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<sup>1</sup> To preserve anonymity, I have used aliases.

apply rules, he considers his communicative competence "very bad", hesitating to speak without checking for mistakes, yet bravely struggling to convey his message, with a strong accent. He understands the gist of newspaper or web articles and newsreading but has trouble understanding fast and informal speech or accent. As a highly intelligent person used to making decisions, I let Helmut cooperate in designing his lessons – he provides authentic materials from his job, solving tasks set by me or by himself, including role-play related to his future field of work. Upon completion I usually comply with his requests for correction and form-focussed explanation.

Helmut has an introverted personality, and his dominant left-brained capacities (suggested by his profession and language preference) as well as his prior experience and job responsibilities have taught him to strive for accuracy and equate errors with failure, which lowers his self-esteem and leads to anxiety and constraint in oral communication. Notwithstanding these considerable disadvantages, Helmut makes the most of his assets – professional ambition, openness to innovation and readiness to experiment with strategies. Assisted by instruction suited to his learner type, he has turned into a successful learner: his fluency, required by his job, has improved in a short time. Capable of using cognitive and metacognitive strategies, Helmut is likely to continue his progress, especially during his stay in L2 environment.

### **4.3 Annemarie, a travelling housewife**

Annemarie (58), a housewife, joined the course ten years ago having no previous language learning experience. She wanted to learn English for travelling and "because you can't do without English anymore" (referring to the prolific use of English expressions in German), intending to have fun without working too hard. Being bilingual in German and Low German<sup>2</sup>, Annemarie quickly detected that Low German is closely related to English and has become quite fluent, although her pronunciation remains poor (probably due to language interference with Low German). She recognizes and takes advantage of structural similarities between both languages. Annemarie's progress has slowed down since her English suffices to communicate during her travels, but she continues "in order to

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<sup>2</sup> Low German is a northern dialect regarded as a separate language by its speakers as well as by various linguists.

stay on top of things" and enjoys exploring authentic language significantly above her level. With a task set out clearly, she also likes interacting and can be very creative.

Despite her current 'fossilization' (Mitchell and Myles, 2001) at a low level of proficiency, Annemarie's learning may be considered successful, as she has fully achieved her goals (communicating fluently in a limited context; having fun). She is intuitive and capable of employing compensatory strategies and relating authentic input from her travels to what is learned in the classroom. Being adventurous and open-minded, Annemarie is highly motivated to continue exploring her 'new world' of language learning and (involuntarily) progress further.

## **5 'Good language learners' – a question of definition**

If the definition of 'good learner' were restricted to learners' aptitude as described by Lightbown and Spada (2001) and to performance results after a certain period of learning, as many prescribed assessment procedures still do, then low-aptitude learners progressing slowly with sub-standard results must be seen as 'bad' learners, notwithstanding their efforts and modest achievements. On the other hand high-aptitude learners achieving good results without having undergone much of a learning process at all would be regarded as 'good' learners – a somewhat unsatisfactory definition.

It is obvious that any definition would depend on a number of questions:

- What was the goal of learning?  
Who set the goal?
- Has a learning process taken place?  
Has the learning process been optimized?
- To what extent has the goal been achieved?  
Who assesses the outcome?  
How is it assessed?

## **5.1 Different viewpoints**

### **5.1.1 Learners' versus teachers' goals**

As can be clearly seen in the case studies of Helmut and Annemarie, learners' goals do not necessarily correspond with teachers' goals: where Helmut's main goal is accuracy, I see the goal set by his job, i.e. communicative fluency, and although I do support Annemarie's secondary goal of having fun, her primary goal of communicating fluently in a limited context is not identical to my goals for the group as a whole, i.e. communicating fluently (and accurately) in widening contexts. Considering different viewpoints of the learning goal may be crucial, as they can lead to different assessment of success ( $\rightarrow$  cf. section 5.1.3).

### **5.1.2 Optimizing the learning process**

For most teachers, opportunities to offer individual students a tailor-made course are rare, and in a crowded classroom the possibilities of addressing individual learners' needs are of course limited. Yet – depending on the learning situation – individual learner types and goals may be recognized, attended to specifically or addressed through the learning group as a whole ( $\rightarrow$  cf. section 6), and learners given assistance in optimizing their strategies. Group dynamics and classroom atmosphere may be controlled, the sociocultural milieu considered and anxiety reduced (if not eliminated) by the teacher. A learning process thus improved is likely to result in better learning outcomes.

The cases of Karen and Helmut show that peer or teacher assistance helps them to increase their self-esteem, expand or change their previous, unavailing learning strategies and improve their learning process. Although this is less true in Karen's case, the positive effect of motivation compensates for her lack of flexibility.

### **5.1.3 Assessment: how and by whom?**

Learner proficiency is usually assessed by formal testing, self-evaluation or informal feedback. Many formal tests, however, measuring mainly linguistic performance, do not necessarily reflect learners' communicative

competence as well, even if included in the learning goals (Mitchell and Myles, 2001). Moreover, with stressed learners falling back into old error patterns (Lightbown and Spada, 2006), a test at one specific moment – stressful to most learners – does not give evidence about successful internalization of structures (Mitchell and Myles, 2001). Assessment (if any) therefore should be adapted to learners' needs and goals and ideally take place alongside learning and without learners' awareness. Ellis (2005, p.11-12) recommends measuring free and controlled production by means of tasks, with "1) a direct assessment of task outcomes, 2) discourse analytic measures and 3) external ratings".

In the context of learners' self-evaluation, the European Language Portfolio offers an interesting approach, including an individual learning biography, performance samples and information about competences disregarded by standardized tests (von der Handt, 2002).

Brown (2007, p.64) criticizes the way of measuring learners' pronunciation or grammar against native-speaker performance as "nitpicking"<sup>3</sup>. Helmut's preference for accuracy and his low self-esteem may well stem from this kind of assessment, although I regard him as communicatively competent. Solving her grammar exercises, Karen might consider herself quite proficient, whereas I see communicative deficiencies. Annemarie, content with her status quo but measuring herself against traditional standards, says her English is 'bad', although I consider her quite fluent and capable of achieving her goals. Obviously, any assessment indicating a learner to be 'good' or 'bad' is arguable.

## **6 Becoming a 'better learner': Classroom effects**

Despite a general gulf between SLA research and language teaching, SLA theories and studies have influenced classroom work considerably (Ellis, 2001); recent findings clearly demonstrate that in a learning group the specific age of learners, the variety of learner characteristics and strategies can be addressed

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<sup>3</sup> Brown's (2007) viewpoint about phonological and grammatical accuracy being less important criteria in fluency assessment is not shared by Baron (200?), who mentions these criteria in a study about communication barriers in airline traffic, based on a number of major disasters caused by language problems. Although this is certainly not relevant for many other situations in real life communication, I am mentioning it as an interesting detail to show how the specific goals of language learning have to be kept in mind at all times.

by a careful blend of approaches and procedures suitable to meet learners' individual needs and improve their learning.

Rejecting prescriptive advice for instruction, Ellis (2005, pp.2-11) presents "provisional specifications in the form of [ten] 'principles'" as encouragement and guidance for teachers to help learners become 'better' learners:

- Principle 1: Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence
- Principle 2: Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning
- Principle 3: Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form
- Principle 4: Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the L2 while not neglecting explicit knowledge
- Principle 5: Instruction needs to take into account the learner's 'built-in syllabus'
- Principle 6: Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input
- Principle 7: Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output
- Principle 8: The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency
- Principle 9: Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners
- Principle 10: In assessing learners' L2 proficiency, it is important to examine free as well as controlled production.

Puchta and Rinvolucris (2005, pp.16-17) see a close relationship between the meaningfulness of classroom activities suited to learners' individual strengths and motivation, and maintain that learners free to access language according to their 'intelligences' may shed anxieties, take more risks and strengthen other abilities, thus increasing success.

Although Lightbown and Spada (2006) do not exclude the use of deductive methods, they consider learner-centred, communicative approaches generally more suitable to address learner characteristics. Brown (2007, p.140-141) proposes 'strategies-based instruction' (SBI), pointing out that "teaching learners how to learn" is crucial, as "learner strategies are the key to learner autonomy". Having become "aware of their styles and preferences", learners should also be encouraged "to take *action* on the basis of that awareness" to improve learning.



## 7 Conclusion

It is evident that most second language learners no longer possess young children's learning abilities. However, the developing cognitive and affective abilities may compensate for 'deficiencies', if the general learning process and learning circumstances as well as the learner's individual characteristics, learning strategies and his sociocultural environment are taken into account.

As Karen's case demonstrates, it is important to let learners with prejudiced beliefs develop new strategies besides familiar ones. Although the learning process may improve faster if the teacher can pay more attention to and interact with an individual learner, as in Helmut's case of one-to-one learning, it is possible to address individual needs and preferences in a group context by using various approaches and offering a wide range of activities. Success also depends on the role of learners' goals in the learning process and whether the latter is measured by linguistic performance and/or communicative competence, as can be seen in the case of Annemarie who might fail a standard test but who has achieved her limited goals and whose strategies enable her, if needed, to expand her competences in the future.

There are undoubtedly a few 'good' language learners possessing a natural aptitude, and Brown (2007) mentions researchers' attempts at defining 'successful' language learners along the lines of typical learner characteristics. However, since these static definitions cannot describe a dynamic process, the essential question is rather if language learners can become '*better*' learners. As has been shown, learners and teachers can improve the learning process together – depending on learners' awareness of this process, their openness towards change and their willingness to actively develop appropriate learning strategies, while the teacher's role is to analyze learner characteristics, react to sociocultural issues, inform learners about learning strategies and address individual needs flexibly by using appropriate methods. In my eyes every language learner who thus becomes a '*better*' learner, however modest his progress, is a '*good*' learner.

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