

The Good Language Learner

Second Language Acquisition

Question PG/03/09

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

H. Douglas Sewell

November 15, 2003

1 Introduction

The greater the task, the more important it is to approach the task in an efficient manner. For many people, learning a second language is one of the most important and demanding tasks they will need to accomplish. This is particularly true in some countries where a student's English abilities are often more important for their career success than their university marks. For these reasons, an awareness of how to learn a language, not just what to learn, is very important. Knowledge of the characteristics of a good language learner can help students increase their language learning efficiency. Additionally, with this knowledge, teachers may be able to help their students improve through learner training.

This paper will attempt to first identify the characteristics associated with a good language learner in three areas: personality characteristics, learning styles, and learning strategies. Further, this paper will ask to what extent these can be used to define a good language learner. Finally, the possibility of improving a student's ability to learn a language will be considered.

2 The Good Language Learner

Many characteristics can influence the success of language learning. Obviously, some innate factors such as age and intelligence are quite fixed. Aptitude is another factor that may be relatively fixed (Ruben 1975:42). Others characteristics may be changeable to greater or lesser degrees.

2.1 Personality Characteristics

A number of personality characteristics have been associated with successful language learning. These include being willing to take risks (Ruben 1979 in Willis 2001:156), having high self esteem (Heyde 1979 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:184) and being inquisitive (Ellis and Sinclair 1989 in Willis 2001:158).

Motivation and a positive attitude have also been correlated with language acquisition (Gardner 1985 in Lightbown and Spada 1999:56). In one construct, motivation can be seen as either

integrative, relating to a desire to integrate into the L2 community, or instrumental, related to learning so as to use the L2 as an instrument to achieve a goal. Gardner and Lambert (1959 and 1972:141 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:173-4) suggest that both types of motivation may be equally powerful, but in different learning contexts, although integrative may be more sustainable. In another construct, motivation can be seen as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Brown (2000:164), citing himself (1990), Dornyei (1998), Dornyei and Csizer (1998), and Crookes and Schmidt (1991), suggests that intrinsic motivation, motivation from inside, is more powerful than extrinsic motivation, motivation from outside. While these two constructs of motivation are related, it is possible for a student to have any of the four combinations of the two constructs.

The relationships between attitude, motivation, and successful language learning seem unclear. Gardner (1979 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:175) suggests that attitude affects motivation and subsequent acquisition. Crookes and Schmidt suggest that motivation research has failed to adequately separate motivation and attitude (1991:501). Lightbown and Spada point out that "If the speaker's only reason for learning the second language is external pressure, internal motivation may be minimal and general attitudes toward learning may be negative" (1999:56). This would suggest ineffective learning, yet this external pressure may arise from the need for good English skills to get a good job, and thus may provide the student with instrumental motivation, which can be as strong a motivator as integrative motivation. It has also been suggested that it may be success that fosters motivation and not motivation that fosters success (Strong 1984:10-2).

A final personality characteristic to consider is extroversion and introversion. Common belief is that extroverts learn quicker than introverts, however the research is inconclusive (Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:184-5). It is reasonable to suggest that extroversion may facilitate the learning of spoken English, but that introverts have more patience and thus may excel in areas of pronunciation, reading, and writing (Brown 2000:155-6).

2.2 Learning Styles

Ambiguity tolerance is a learning style that has been correlated to student achievement (Brown 2000:120). It allows the learner to temporarily disregard some perceived contradictions or confusions, not get frustrated, and thus proceed with learning (Larson-Freeman and Long

1991:191). The premise with this being that a resolution to the issue will develop later. However, too much tolerance to ambiguity may result in the learner failing to integrate newly learned material, as would be the case if a person was simply memorizing and accepting grammar rules. Thus, while some intolerance to ambiguity may make language learning more efficient, too much intolerance could result in a closed rigid mind that is unable to learn a second language (Brown 2000:120).

A second learning style is the continuum of reflective to impulsive. People with reflective styles tend to take longer but make fewer errors, while those with impulsive styles are quicker but make more errors. This has been observed in L1 children (Messer 1976 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:195) and L2 adults (Doron 1973 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:196). It appears that being neither too reflective nor too impulsive is the most beneficial to second language acquisition.

A further learner style is field dependence and field independence. People who are field dependent are less able to isolate individual items from the larger context, but are more able to see the larger context itself clearly. People who are field independent are more able to see the details within a larger picture, but may not see the larger picture as clearly (Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:193, Brown 2000:114-5). While some people are biased toward one side or the other, this is a continuum and individual tasks require some amount of both field dependence and independence (Brown 2000:115).

Numerous studies have shown a correlation between field independence and second language acquisition in the classroom (Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:193). Brown suggests that relatively field independent students will do well on tests and in the class room (1977 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:194), however relatively field dependent students will learn the communicative aspects of language quicker due to their "...empathy, social outreach, and perception of other people" (Brown 2000:116). Brown then comes to the conclusion that both are important, but for different types of learning (2000:116).

While the learning styles above seem to be detrimental to second language learning if a student is too much toward one pole of the continuum, other styles such as a student's preference for an inductive versus deductive learning style or a visual versus auditory presentation style do not

seem to be correlated with successful language learning. For these styles, the issue would appear to be in situations in which the learner required a different style than the teacher employed (Levin et al. 1974 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:196). In such situations, the more successful language learner may be the learner who has a teacher that teaches in the same way as the student is comfortable learning.

2.3 Learning Strategies

Rubén (1975:43) uses the term learning strategies to mean "the techniques and devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge". Based on the work of O'Malley et al. (1985a:32-34), learning strategies are often defined in three areas. The first are meta-cognitive strategies that deal with the awareness and ability to control the process of learning. Meta-cognitive strategies employed by good language learners include monitoring production (Rubén 1979 in Willis 2001:157), being self-aware, being realistic, and being organized (Rubén and Thompson 1982 in Brown 2000:123).

The second are cognitive strategies that relate more directly to learning itself and include the acts of memorization and integration. An example of a cognitive strategy employed by good language learners is mnemonic vocabulary learning (Cohen and Apeh 1980, 1981; Cohen 1987 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:212). The third are the socio-affective strategies that are related to the actual use of language. Socio-affective strategies employed by good language learners include making errors work for them not against them, learning chunks of language to go beyond their competence, compensation for their weaknesses, and avoidance of areas of weakness (Rubén and Thompson 1982 in Brown 2000:123).

The list of strategies associated with successful second language could be much longer. From O'Malley et al. (1985b:557) among others, it appears that students who are able to employ a wider range of effective meta-cognitive, cognitive, and communicative strategies, are generally more successful language learners.

2.4 Conclusion

While some personality characteristics such as being willing to take risks and being inquisitive seem to be useful in describing the good language learner, a number of other characteristics like motivation seem to be of less use due to conflicting research results or unclear cause effect associations. Learning styles seem to be more useful in describing the good language learner. With some learning styles like ambiguity tolerance-intolerance, reflexivity-impulsiveness, and field dependence-independence, it seems that the good learner is the one who is between the two extremes of the constructs. For other styles like deductive-inductive or visual-auditory, there does not seem to be any clear evidence that one style is better than the other. Clearer insights into describing a good language learner come from strategy research that seems to suggest that those who can employ more strategies effectively are better language learners.

3 Good Language Learners Exist But Depend on Context

The correlations that can be made between some personality characteristics, learner styles and learner strategies and successful language learning suggest that good language learners exist. However, as many factors that come together to promote language learning, it is difficult to define a good language learner.

Many researchers have looked at the concept of the good language learner. To determine if someone was a good language learner, Naiman et al. (1978 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:185) let the L2 learners self profess if they were good language learners or not. This is a potentially unreliable method. Other researchers used standardized written or listening comprehension tests (Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:185). While it is easy to suggest that someone who has learned to read, write, speak, and listen effectively in English in a relatively short time is a good language learner, it is unclear whether someone who has only learned one or two of these skills is also a good language learner. It also seems the speed of acquisition and previous exposure to English should also be carefully considered. Thus, the methods of determining if someone is a good language learner seem unclear and make comparisons difficult.

In determining if someone is a good language learner, the students' goals should also be considered. A student of Medicine or Engineering in China may never need to speak English, but may need to be able to read English textbooks when translations are not available. Thus, good reading comprehension skills may be all that are needed. An older immigrant who works in a coffee shop in New York may not need extensive reading or writing skills, thus listening comprehension skills and spoken fluency would be of primary concern. In these situations, I would suggest that the acquisition of necessary skills, as defined by the language learner, in a reasonable period indicate a successful language learner.

Also, when looking at the good language learner, it seems we should not only include the characteristics of students who have achieved fluency in their desired skills, but also look at students who are in the process of learning. Chesterfield and Barrows-Chesterfield (1985:56) showed that learner strategies in children evolve over time and the sequence has a natural order. O'Malley et al. (1985a:37) further showed that intermediate high school learners used more meta-cognitive strategies than beginners. It is unclear whether learners are learning to learn or simply using different strategies that are more appropriate at different levels. It may be misleading to believe that the characteristics associated with a good advanced learner would also apply to a good beginner learner. Deciding to include or not include characteristics of students who have decided to stop actively learning, perhaps because they feel their English skills are good enough, even if a native speaker would feel otherwise, is a further question to explore.

It is also reasonable to hypothesize that the interplay of different personality characteristics, learning styles and learning strategies may have a confounding effect on learning success. This could result in a skill that would be advantageous to one learner being detrimental to another.

Referring back to the original question, good language learners seem to exist, however a more important pedagogical issue may be whether there is such a thing as the best language learner. Although some traits can be identified which are shared by many good language learners, considering the differing learning situations, goals and levels of students, as well as the interactions of differing personalities, styles and strategies, it seems that each good language learner may be somewhat unique, and that a single definition of the best language learner may be as possible as the average family with 2.4 children and 0.8 dogs.

4 Possibility of Becoming a Better Language Learner

Having argued that there is no best language learner, only differing types of good ones, I do not exclude that people can not become better language learners. Language learners may never be able to reach some definition of perfection in their ability to learn, but the possibility of improving the efficiency of language learning seems to exist because humans seem to always be able to learn new ways to do things. While the extent to which individual students are able to become better language learners may be variable, at the very least, all students should be able to benefit by learning at least some new learning strategies.

4.1 Change Through Learner Training

For those characteristics above which are shown to correlate with successful language learning, one route toward becoming a better language learner may be learner training to change styles and learn strategies. Personality traits in adults would appear to be the hardest to change. Learning styles should be easier to change, but learning styles are related to educational styles within a society, and may still be difficult to modify. Perhaps acquiring new learner strategies would be the easiest goal to accomplish. Skehan echoes this in part by saying that aptitude is relatively unchangeable, but style and strategy are different (1998:272).

MacIntyre and Noels (1996 in Brown 2000:131) found that students benefit from strategies based instruction if they understand the strategies, feel they are effective, and find them easy to implement. In O'Malley et al.'s research, beginning and intermediate high school students were taught meta-cognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies. His results showed that speaking skills increased in students that received strategies based instruction, and that the improvement was greatest in students who received both meta-cognitive and cognitive strategy instruction. Listening skills also increased in situations where the task difficulty was within the range of the students' competence (1985b:574-6). These results support the potential for students to become better learners through learner training.

4.2 Effect of Learner Beliefs on Possibility of Change

Learner beliefs about the right way to learn or the right role for teachers and students in a classroom may have a severe limiting effect on the possibility of change and thus the potential to become a better language learner. As Lightbown and Spada note "Virtually all learners, particularly older learners, have very strong beliefs and opinions about how their instruction should be delivered." (1999:59). This is exemplified by a report on international students learning English as a second language in a very communicative program at an English university. In this program, the students felt certain that they were not learning efficiently due to the instructional approach that was different from their beliefs about the best way to learn (Yorio 1986 in Lightbown and Spada 1999:59). The issue of teaching new styles and strategies that are too different is raised by Bialystok, who notes Piaget's (1929) principle of optimal novelty and Vygotsky's (1962) 'zone of proximal development', and suggests that "the human ability to incorporate forms of thought or ideas that are radically different from present experience seems to be severely limited" (1985:259-60).

It is easy to hypothesize that if a teacher's ideas go against a learner's beliefs about the right way to learn, then the learner may disregard the learner-training lesson. This could result in a failure to become a better language learner. This suggests that a teacher contemplating learner training must be aware of his or her student's beliefs and take them into consideration when planning learner training, and should approach learner training carefully so the students do not reject the concepts outright.

4.3 Limits of Necessary Learner Training

For characteristics which have not been shown to be associated with unsuccessful language learning, becoming a better language learner may not require learner training, and may instead be achievable by matching learning styles and teaching styles. As Lightbown and Spada point out, "when learners express a preference for seeing something written or for memorizing material which we feel should be learned in a less formal way, we should not assume that their ways of working are wrong" (1999:58).

Matching learning and teaching styles was done in Canada to teach French to English speaking government employees. The results indicated that if students were matched to one of three methodological approaches: audio-visual, analytic, or functional, their rate of improvement was enhanced (Wesche 1981 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:207). It seems learner training is most appropriate for those styles and strategies that have first been shown to be beneficial to language learning. It seems less appropriate for those cultural, educational, or personal differences that are simply different from the teacher's styles and strategies,

Contrary to this argument, Larson-Freeman and Long point out that "...some would argue that rather than catering to students' particular cognitive styles, learners should be challenged to develop a range of styles" (1991:211) Grasha suggests this could help students in dealing with future academic work (1972 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:211)

4.4 Conclusion

The extent of the benefit of learner training will depend on whether learner personalities, learning styles or learning strategies are the focus. It will also depend on learner beliefs and learner training being approached appropriately. For styles and strategies that have not been shown to be detrimental to language learning, learner training may be less necessary and matching teaching styles to learning styles may instead be beneficial.

5 Application to Korean Classrooms

5.1 Language Learning Issues in Korean Classrooms - Learning Styles

Of the learning styles discussed above, field independence to the exclusion of the larger context and a lack of ambiguity tolerance are the learning styles that most need focused attention in my Korean classrooms. Too much field independence is noticeable in the way many of my students seem to be able to pick out details very well, while being unaware of the larger context. I attribute this to an over emphasis on multiple choice and fill in the blank tests and an under emphasis on comprehension based tests throughout their academic careers. As noted, research has shown that for effective learning, having aspects of both field dependence and independence is probably

beneficial. Perhaps learner training could help my students come more towards the middle of this construct. However, such training would seem to require longer than my one-month classes to show a result.

A lack of ambiguity tolerance is exemplified by many of my students who often seek to know the exact meaning of a word, sentence, or grammatical structure while not being satisfied with understanding the overall meaning of the item. When told that the word or phrase kind of means something they ask again or consult their English-Korean dictionaries, and often seem to feel frustration when unable to find a lexical definition or grammar rule that satisfies them.

A teaching practice that I have found to effectively deal with this issue when it arises in the classroom is to ask students to define the exact colour of their chair (a rather orangish mustard yellow at my school) or the exact colour of a piece of clothing they are wearing. A further question I often ask is for students to tell me what love means, exactly. This very basic form of learner training helps student see that exact answers are not always possible, or not always necessary.

5.2 Language Learning Issues in Korean Classrooms - Learner Beliefs

A further way of helping my Korean students become better language learners could involve work in the area of learner beliefs about useful leaning styles and strategies. Perhaps due to their middle school and high school educational culture, Korean students have very strong beliefs about appropriate learning styles and strategies. Such beliefs are often quite homogeneous throughout Korean culture. These are exemplified by the belief that grammar should be taught deductively and continuously, that rote memorization of vocabulary and idioms is very important and beneficial, and that the classroom should be teacher centered.

The possibility for improvement exists because, while many of my students feel comfortable with these styles and strategies, many also feel frustrated with their lack of significant improvement. If learner training was presented appropriately, as advocated by MacIntyre and Noels (1996 in Brown 2000:131), it could overcoming the discomfort some of my students feel due to their beliefs and could help them become better language learners.

5.3 Language Learning Issues in Korean Classrooms - Matching Students and Teachers

As foreign native speaker teachers are almost nonexistent in middle and high schools, as well as in TOEIC classrooms, there seems to be relatively few differences between learner styles and teacher styles in these environments. Within universities and in private language schools, the opposite is the case and native speakers are almost exclusively the teachers. As western educational practices have many differences from those in Korea, many difficulties can arise between student learning styles and teacher teaching styles in Korea.

Matching students to teaching styles, as was done teaching French in Canada (Wesche 1981 in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991:207), would seem less beneficial in Korea than in Canada because of the relative uniformity of students in desiring one style and the relative uniformity of native speaking teachers to teach using a different style. Within the Korean context, it seems reasonable that for styles and strategies that are not associated with unsuccessful language learning, native speaking teachers, such as myself, should make a greater effort to modify our teaching styles to reflect the way our students prefer to learn than is presently done, and reserve the learner training for aspects which would be more beneficial to becoming a better language learner.

One aspect of Korean classrooms where matching learners to teachers might be useful is in the desire of students to learn in a fun or in a serious environment. Such students could be matched with teachers who prefer a more social class atmosphere or with teachers who prefer a more serious class atmosphere. It is possible that this may already happen to some degree with serious students more often choosing to enroll in TOEIC or TOEFL classes, and students who are more interested in social learning enrolling in conversation classes. Interestingly, at my school many students change classes after one or two days. It would be interesting to investigate if some students change classes in the hope of finding a teacher who was more or less serious, or matched the student's preferred learning style in some other way.

5.4 Language Learning Issues in Korean Classrooms - Learning Strategies

Of the learning strategies outlined above, meta-cognitive strategies, and in particular self-management strategies (see O'Malley et al. 1985a:33-4) are an area of concern. A greater

awareness of metacognitive strategies might help my students become more aware of how and why they learn, or fail to learn. For example, enough sleep is often considered important to learn effectively, yet many of my students will study when they are extremely tired. The result is that they often fail to integrate new material well and feel frustration. When I suggest to them that they did not learn because they were tired, they often agree, perhaps to be polite, yet indicate that in reality all they need to do is study more and harder.

Teaching of meta-cognitive strategies to my Korean students may pose problems because the student independence implied by some such strategies goes contrary to the teacher centered and controlled classroom that feels natural to many of my Korean students. This is an issue because teaching my students cognitive strategies without teaching them the meta-cognitive strategies needed to be aware of which strategies work for them, and without encouraging them to switch between strategies when one fails, would seem pointless, as echoed by O'Malley et al. when he says "students without meta-cognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to review their progress, accomplishments and future learning directions." (1985b:561). Once my students have the ability to judge the success or failure of a strategy for themselves, then the teaching of almost any strategy could perhaps be justified on the grounds that it could benefit some of my students and those students would be able to incorporate the strategy into their learning tool case.

5.5 Student and Teacher Roles in Overcoming These Issues

Assisting my Korean students to balance field dependent and independent styles, develop a healthy tolerance to ambiguity, and overcome some learner beliefs may help them become better language learners. Additionally, the development of meta-cognitive strategies, and in particular the ability to be critical of any learning styles used, would seem to be a further powerful way to help them.

Teachers, such as myself, should ask our learners to try new styles and strategies with an open mind and not reject them too quickly, while our students should ask us to respect preferred styles and strategies when change is not necessarily beneficial. It is unfortunate that one weakness in the Korean context seems to be the meta-cognitive strategy of self-management, which is one area that could help students not reject new learning styles and strategies too quickly. As learning

styles such as tolerance to ambiguity seem more difficult and time consuming to change than learning strategies such as teaching a student a new way to learn vocabulary, learning style training may be more appropriate in a longer high school or university type course than my one month language school class.

6 Conclusion

While good language learners exist, creating a definition of the best language learner is a potentially impossible task. Language learning may turn out to be a perpetually evolving skill, with learners always one or a few steps away from some ideal for their situation. Thus, the good learner may simply be the learner who has an open mind, the willingness to honestly try new learning strategies and is always learning how to learn. The teachers' job may be to give students a toolbox of styles and strategies that appear to be beneficial along with the ability to select which work for them.

Understanding the issues relating to good language learners is an important step in helping students learn more efficiently. Once these concepts are understood, the potential for learner training can be explored and teachers can approach their students with helpful well designed tasks to help their students become better language learners.

References

- Bialystok, E. (1985) 'The compatibility of teaching and learning strategies'. *Applied Linguistics* 6/3:255-62.
- Brown, H.D. (2000) *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. (4th edn.) New York: Longman (Formerly New Jersey: Prentice Hall).
- Chesterfield, R. and Barrows-Chesterfield, K. (1985) 'Natural order in children's second language learning strategies'. *Applied Linguistics* 6/1:45-59.
- Crookes, G. and Schmidt, R. (1991) 'Motivation: reopening the research agenda'. *Language Learning* 41:469-512.
- Larson-Freeman, D. and Long, M. (1991) *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*. London: Longman.
- Lightbown, P. M. and Spada, N. (1999) *How Languages are Learnt*. (2nd edn.) Oxford: OUP.
- O'Malley, J. M., Chamot, A. U., Stewner-Manzanares, G., Kupper, L. and Russo, R. P. (1985a) 'Learning strategies used by beginning and intermediate ESL students'. *Language Learning* 35:21-46.
- O'Malley, J. M., Chamot, A. U., Stewner-Manzanares, G., Russo, R. P. and Kupper, L. (1985b) 'Learning strategy applications with students of English as a second language'. *TESOL Quarterly* 19:557-84.
- Ruben, J. (1975) 'What the 'good language learner' can teach us'. *TESOL Quarterly* 9:41-51.
- Skehan, P. (1998) *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*. Oxford:OUP
- Strong, M. (1984) 'Integrative motivation: cause or result of successful second language acquisition?'. *Language Learning* 34:1-14
- Willis, D. (2001) *Second Language Acquisition*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham.