

The ‘Good Language Learner’

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Introduction:*1.1 'The Good Language Learner', according to my experiences, and my thoughts regarding whether strategies can be taught*

In my 12 years as an EFL language teacher and 5 years as a teacher trainer, I have noticed that most of 'my' best language learners have possessed a variety of characteristics.

First of all, these learners are motivated to learn and they believe that they are capable of learning. Typically, they have a high tolerance for ambiguity, are patient with themselves, aware of their own learning styles and cognizant of effective learning strategies and they are not afraid to ask questions or make mistakes. Most of these learners have good organizational skills and willingly accept suggestions of how to become even more organised! The good language learners I know are either aware of how to record, remember and retrieve new information, or quickly learn the skills, and they readily seek opportunities to use it. They tend to become more involved with their host families and the community they are living in and they often want to get to know members of their community, practice English and build lasting relationships. Of course, not all of these 'good language learners' have possessed all of these qualities simultaneously, but most developed them over time and put them to good use.

I believe good language learners are capable of learning without a teacher's guidance but when a teacher is available, they are able to use her as a resource and benefit from the relationship. Rather than seeing the teacher as 'all-knowing' and someone never to be questioned, these learners see the teacher as a facilitator or an equal partner.

In my opinion, with motivation, encouragement and support, anyone can learn to be a better learner. Strategies that we use in our first language, as well as those from other skill areas, can be applied and/or modified when learning a second language. Once learners become aware of their learning style and assess what strategies they are already familiar with, others can be added to ensure a better, more effective and enjoyable learning experience.

The ‘Good Language Learner’ according to experts in the EFL field:

2.1 Characteristics of Good Language Learners’

Like me, experienced EFL practitioners believe that learners need to be aware of their own learning styles, be willing to take risks both inside and outside of the classroom and need to be people who do not worry about making mistakes, or need information to be immediately transparent.

According to Rubin and Thompson (1983), a good language learner possesses some of these 12 characteristics.

Rubin and Thompson’s Characteristics of a Good Learner {1983}

1. Good learners find their own way
2. Good learners organize information about language
3. Good learners are creative and experiment with language
4. Good learners make their own opportunities, and find strategies for getting practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom
5. Good learners learn to live with uncertainty and develop strategies for making sense of the target language without wanting to understand every word
6. Good learners use mnemonics (rhymes, word associations, etc. to recall what has been learned)
7. Good learners make errors work
8. Good learners use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of their first language in mastering a second language
9. Good learners let the context (extra-linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world) help them in comprehension
10. Good learners learn to make intelligent guesses
11. Good learners learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform ‘beyond their competence’
12. Good learners learn production techniques (e.g. techniques for keeping a conversation going)
13. Good learners learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language according to the formality of the situation

(Figure 1) Nunan, David (2000) Language Teaching Methodology, Harlow, Pearson Education Ltd. Page 171

Rubin and Thompson were not the only ones who felt that it was important for students to take risks (3, 4, 5), use their previous schema (8), be motivated (4, 5), have solid strategies in place (4, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13) and be able to live with uncertainty (5). Oxford and Brown also agreed. (Oxford, 1990) (Brown, 2000).

According to McDonough and Shaw,

“Success is thought to be based on such factors as checking one’s performance in a language, being willing to guess and to ‘take risks’ with both comprehension and production, seeking out opportunities to practice, developing efficient memorizing strategies, and many others” (McDonough and Shaw, 2003:56).

Lightbown and Spada’s list resembles Rubin and Thompson’s but they thought learners should also have a high intelligence, good academic skills and enjoy the process of learning. They implied that if a learner had good skills and was able to learn other subjects, they could then apply those same skills (ex. looking for patterns etc.) to learning a language.

Lightbown and Spada’s Characteristics of a ‘Good Language Learner’{1997}

1. Good learners are willing and accurate guessers
2. Good learners are willing to make mistakes
3. Good learners try to communicate even without language
4. Good learners look for patterns
5. Good learners practice whenever possible
6. Good learners analyse their own speech
7. Good learners pay attention to their own standards
8. Good learners enjoy grammar
9. Good learners begin learning in childhood
10. Good learners have above average IQs
11. Good learners have good academic skills
12. Good learners have good self image and self confidence

(Figure 2) Adapted from: Lightbown, Patsy M. and Spada, Nina (1997), *How Languages are Learned (7th Impression)*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, page 34

Tricia Hedge’s list focuses on ‘Self-Directed Learners’. She believes that learners who have good strategies in place and who are autonomous will likely be more successful than learners who depend on the teacher for everything and who blindly follow without trying to process the information and make it their own (Hedge, 2000). Being ‘Self-Directed’ means that you are motivated to learn and are willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish the task.

Tricia Hedge's Characteristics of a 'Self-Directed Learner' {2000}

1. Self-Directed learners know their needs and work productively with the teacher towards achieving their objectives
2. Self-directed learners know how to use resources independently
3. Self-directed learners learn both inside and outside the classroom
4. Self-directed learners adjust their learning strategies as needed
5. Self-directed learners manage and divide the time in learning properly
6. Self-directed learners learn with active thinking
7. Self-directed learners don't think the teacher is a god who can give them

(Figure 3) Adapted from: Hedge, Tricia (2000), *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*, Oxford, Oxford University Press., page 76

Holden says,

“Autonomous learners are both cognitively and meta-cognitively aware of their role in the learning process, seek to create their own opportunities to learn, monitor their learning, and attempt actively to manage their learning in and out of the classroom.”
(Holden, 2002:18)

2.2 Studies of the 'Good Language Learner'

There have been numerous studies done on 'The Good Language Learner'. Unfortunately, it is difficult to prove many of the things that we 'know' to be true because they are based on our experiences which are hard to quantify (Lightbown and Spada, 1997).

One study, conducted by David Nunan, examined the practices of 44 non-native English speaking EFL teachers from a variety of Asian countries. He found that being motivated and willing to take risks, having opportunities to practice the language they had learned both inside and outside of the classroom and having some activities that were form-focused and learner-centered were the strongest factors which influenced the learning of this group of participants. Not being provided with opportunities to speak or automatize the language was listed as the main reason the participants felt they struggled when learning a language (Nunan, 2000).

Generally, it seems to be that it is the attitudes, skills and strategies learners possess that dictate whether or not they will be able to grasp the intricacies of language (Oxford, 1990) (Nunan,

2000). Because of my experiences in the classroom, both as a teacher and a teacher trainer, I agree with the results of these studies.

My personal experience with ‘Good Language Learners’:

3.1 My teaching beliefs and methods

I have been very fortunate over the last 12 years to have worked with many language learners who were motivated to learn, willing to take risks, able to accept initial confusion and happy to follow suggestions.

I believe that students learn better if they understand themselves and forge relationships with their peers and their teacher and, as a result, I always spend the first week of every term doing group building tasks and individual assessments of various kinds. I promote tasks which focus on confidence building (ex. journal writing and peer checking) and use my teacher talk time to encourage and support (ex. praise and humour). I encourage learners to make mistakes and to record them in ways that will trigger their memories. Typically, these learners respond by relaxing faster, sharing their ideas more freely and being willing to make mistakes.

My preferred method of teaching is through guided discovery, task based activities and pair work. I advise students to ask each other questions, to seek answers in their dictionaries and to ask for clarification. Generally, learners are more motivated if they are discovering the information for themselves. “Working things out for themselves prepares students for greater self-reliance and is therefore conducive to learner autonomy” (Thornbury, 1999:54).

Since the students buy their own textbooks, I feel obligated to use them for part of the class time. However, through surveys conducted during the first week, I ensure that topics students have requested are covered. By responding to what the students have said, the class becomes theirs. Teachers should “find ways for students to have power over what they learn, how they learn it, and to examine and reflect upon what they have done” (Nagel, 1998:39). This, in turn, encourages learner autonomy.

3.2 Methods used to conduct this research

After the initial activities and setting of class rules, I gave the students a short survey of their learning style (See Appendix #2) and a journal in order to better communicate with me and to use for their writing homework. At the end of each day, I requested feedback from the students regarding their interest in new activities and level of difficulty of the tasks. They were also encouraged to select topics for the next day's lesson and to identify tasks they had enjoyed. "Students may be more motivated if they are allowed to choose activities and texts themselves" (Taylor, ETP, page10).

Each week, either in their journals or in person, I told them what I felt they had improved on and I offered them suggestions of what to work on the next week and how they might do it. I also responded to their questions (See Appendix #3).

I kept a personal diary during the two months (See Appendix #4 for excerpts). In it, I recorded my observations of the students and their progress, both as a developing group and as individuals as they met new material. This included tasks they had appeared to like and do well with, as well as tasks that had proved challenging, progress I had noticed individuals making and specifics I had noticed regarding the learning strategies they were employing and their individual learning styles.

3.2 My intermediate class for February – March 2005

** All students named have provided written and/or oral permission to use their names and information in this paper **

| Student name | Gender | Age | Country of origin | Learning style; sensory | Learning style; | Learning style- Gardener's | Learning style- as stated by the | Motivation | Tolerance for |
|--------------|--------|-----|-------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|------------|---------------|
|--------------|--------|-----|-------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|------------|---------------|

| | | | | | cognitive | Multiple Intelligences | student | | Ambiguity |
|----------|---|----|-------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Ali | M | 20 | Saudi Arabia | Visual; kinaesthetic | Analytic | Musical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, linguistic, logical, spatial, kinaesthetic | Visual, analytical, intrapersonal and interpersonal, likes to use his dictionary, translates from L1 to L2, takes notes | int; inte; instru <i>university</i> , ex | Medium |
| Abdullah | M | 24 | Saudi Arabia | Visual; kinaesthetic | Analytic | Musical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, logical, linguistic, spatial, kinaesthetic | Visual, takes notes, likes to be corrected, does not translate | int; inte; instru <i>university</i> , ex | High |
| 'A' | M | 21 | Saudi Arabia | Visual; auditory | Global | Interpersonal, spatial, intrapersonal | No data | int; inte; instru <i>university</i> | High |
| Ayman | M | 19 | Saudi Arabia | Auditory; visual | Global | Musical, intrapersonal, spatial, naturalistic | Auditory, uses phonemes to help with pronunciation, translates from L1 to L2 | initially instru and int, then inte. and ex | High |
| Makled | M | 24 | Saudi Arabia | Auditory; visual | Analytic | Interpersonal, linguistic, logical | Likes to take notes, interpersonal, auditory, uses repetition, visual, analytical learner | int; inte; instru <i>university</i> , ex | Low - medium |
| 'M' | F | 21 | Japan | Visual; kinaesthetic; auditory | Analytic | Intrapersonal, spatial, musical, kinaesthetic | Likes to write in her journal, not self-confident, prefers small groups | int; instru <i>university</i> | Low |
| Mathieu | M | 21 | St. Pierre and Michelon | Auditory; visual | Global | Musical, spatial, intrapersonal | Interpersonal, visual, aural, likes to be corrected and translating from L1 to L2 | initially instru and int then inte. and ex | High |
| 'S' | F | 28 | Saudi Arabia | Visual | Global | Interpersonal. spatial | No data | Instru, inte, ex | medium |
| Toyoko | F | 24 | Japan | Visual; kinaesthetic | Analytic | Intrapersonal, interpersonal, spatial, linguistic, kinaesthetic | Visual analytical, intrapersonal and interpersonal, likes corrections, translates from L1 to L2 | int, inte, instru <i>husband's business</i> | High |
| 'YS' | M | 62 | Korean | Visual | Analytic | Intrapersonal, spatial | Takes notes, intrapersonal, needs time to process before sharing with partner | int; inte; instru <i>immigration</i> | Low |

(Figure 4) My present language class

(Note: re. Motivation ex= extrinsic; int= intrinsic; inte= integral; instru=instrumental)

What I confirmed and learned about 'Good Language Learners':**4.1 The results and what I discovered about "Good Language Learners"**

First of all, I have come to the conclusion that what I have always known to be true, is. By that, I mean:

1. People are different and, therefore, need different things in order to learn well
2. People notice features of language when and if they are ready
3. Some people need more encouragement, in the form of praise, prompting, reminders
and loving attention than others, but everyone needs some
4. Everyone is able to acquire new strategies if they are presented in a systematic,

(Figure 5: Conclusions I have drawn)

Secondly, the past two months have reinforced my belief that in order for learners to be able to learn well, to be “Good Language Learners”, they need to:

1. Be motivated
2. Believe that they are capable of learning; have some self-confidence
3. Be willing to accept that making mistakes is a good thing and take risks
4. Be aware of/understand their own learning style
5. Have some good learning strategies in place, including meta-cognitive strategies such as being organized, or readily learn them
6. Be willing to accept feedback and respond to suggestions
7. Be willing/able to tolerate uncertainty
8. Be willing to participate
9. See the teacher as a person who is willing to help and be willing to let go of the image that the teacher is a ‘god’

(Figure 6: My beliefs regarding the Characteristics of “Good Language Learners”)

4.2 My observations regarding the ‘Characteristics of Good Language Learners’

4.2a. Motivation

“There is a high correlation between motivation and success” (Nunan and Lamb, 1996:208). The students with whom I have consistently noticed the most improvement are those who are internally motivated. They are usually more successful than those who are motivated solely by their parents’ or employers desire for them to learn English. Students who want to integrate into and learn about their new environment and who genuinely like the new community are typically more open to the experience of learning the new language.

Ayman was initially only motivated extrinsically. He hadn’t liked school in Saudi Arabia and often got in trouble. His father wanted him to go to Canada to learn English but Ayman was not very interested. When he arrived, he was only one of two beginner students and he felt quite isolated. His teachers were not satisfied with his efforts and his father emailed regularly to express his dissatisfaction with his progress, which was minimal. However, once he started to get praise and personal, written feedback, he became more attentive and more successful in class. The attention, according to Ayman, had given him a reason to learn and to communicate and he soon became intrinsically motivated. “The positive feedback that learners perceive is a boost to their feelings of competence and self-determination. No other externally administered set of rewards has a lasting effect” (Brown, 2001:77).

Now, he writes his learning journal regularly, asks to be corrected and works hard to improve. He has the motivation, self-confidence and self-awareness that he needs to do well. The change is phenomenal. His father has also recognized and acknowledged his efforts and has expressed his satisfaction directly to Ayman. “Emotions play a key role in the learning process” (Leiguarda, 2001:49) (Oxford, 1990).

Ali, Ayman’s brother, was already intrinsically motivated when he arrived. A successful learner at home, he brought his skills with him and applied them to his English studies readily. He wants to go to university and then return home to work. He likes to speak in English and to share ideas and seeks opportunities to engage native speakers in dialogues on a regular basis.

Toyoko is an excellent example of a student who is integrally motivated. She and her husband plan to be in Canada for one year. She wanted to meet people in the community so she set up a craft booth at a local Saturday market and started as a sushi chef at a local supermarket. Toyoko has taken every opportunity possible to practice the language she has learned and her progress has been steady.

“The attitude of learners toward the target language, the learning situation and the roles that they are expected to play within that learning situation will have an important effect on the learning process.” (Nunan and Lamb, 1996:215)

4.2b Self-confidence and a willingness to make mistakes and take risks

“Successful language learning necessitates overcoming inhibitions and learning to take reasonable risks as in guessing meanings or speaking up despite the possibility of making a mistake” (Oxford, 1990:142). While having self-confidence is not an essential requirement initially, it is directly related to being willing to make mistakes and take risks. Students who are able to convince themselves that mistakes are not horrific things and that nothing bad will happen to them, quickly build up their confidence. This helps them to answer questions in class, to take more risks and to enjoy the experience more.

Ali and Abdullah are perfect examples of this. They answer questions readily, accept feedback when they make errors and then use the corrected language in their journals in order to learn from their errors. Their vocabulary has increased dramatically. They also both attempt to engage people outside of the school in dialogue and frequently report on what they have learned about the community in their journals and in class.

Mathieu is a good example of someone who is now a good learner but who needed some support to get there. When he initially came to school, he didn't speak much. He had tested at a low-intermediate level but appeared lower. In actual fact, Mathieu is quite shy. He had also had negative school experiences before coming to ILI. Not only did he dislike school but his image of himself as a learner was quite low.

However, Mathieu has a very ‘good ear’ for sound. Whenever we did pronunciation work, he was the first to recognize word stress and individual phonemes. By asking him to repeat the new words for his classmates and by giving him praise, he began to contribute with more regularity of his own accord. He now regularly laughs and participates in class, offers answers during feedback and assists his classmates with their pronunciation and spelling. Mathieu takes more risks and says he enjoys learning now (Nagel, 1998). His success with his progress tests, something he was not accustomed to, also helped build his confidence (See Appendix #5). Littlejohn expresses this phenomenon beautifully,

“As human beings, we generally like what we do well and are therefore more likely to do it again, and put in more effort. If we put in more effort, we generally get better, and so this sustains our motivation” (Littlejohn, ETP, page 6)

5 Korean women in a class I have been subbing are good examples of learners whom I would say are not yet ‘good language learners’ because they are incredibly self-conscious. While they are aware that they have to take risks and make mistakes in order to learn, they are unwilling to do so. They are so focused on being correct, that they have not made a noticeable improvement in their five months of continuous study. From my past experiences and extensive reading, I have recognized that this is cultural. However, until they accept that they are in a different culture, or are placed in a class with no other Koreans, they will likely continue to progress slowly. “Many instructional contexts around the world do not encourage risk-taking: instead, they encourage correctness, right answers, and withholding “guesses” until one is sure to be correct” (Brown, 2001:63).

4.2c. Awareness of their own learning styles

‘There is little doubt that individual differences exist and that they play a significant role in language learning’ (Hedge, 2000:24). Students who have some awareness of the ways they need to process information have a distinct advantage over those who do not. For example, students who struggle with listening texts, will know to take notes and to listen to key words. Visual learners will record and retrieve information differently than auditory or kinaesthetic learners, just as global learners and analytical learners will process information differently.

By being aware of their sensory and cognitive learning styles, students are better able to ask for what they need. “Certain ways of approaching a task are more successful for one person than for another” (Lightbown and Spada, 1997:40).

For example, Abdullah is a visual, linguistic, logical learner (according to Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences) and his cognitive learning style is “analytical”. He needs to take notes and see words in print, both on the board and in his notebook and he appreciates being introduced to the ‘rules’ he is working on before he is given the task to do. He copies his notes out every week and uses them in stories etc. because he needs to see the new language contextualized.

4.2d Having good learning strategies in place

Good language learners usually have a few strategies in place to help them, even if they are unable to identify them by name. As Nunan states,

“Knowledge of strategies is important, because the greater awareness you have of what you are doing, if you are conscious of the processes underlying the learning that you are involved in, then learning will be more effective” (Nunan, 1990:171).

4.2di Meta-cognitive strategies

Learners who have good meta-cognitive strategies in place when they initially begin studying come to class prepared to learn and to take notes. These students have the required binders and pens and have usually organized them in such a way as to have easy access to the new information (Brown, 2000). They also take their physical surroundings into consideration when selecting a place to study and remove distractions. These learners set learning goals on a daily basis. They prepare to study by previewing the next chapter in their unit, carefully reading the teacher’s comments on past work and reviewing their notes.

4.2dii Cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies are also necessary. Knowing about repetition, note taking, grouping or chunking words, inferencing, imagery and transferring etc. are all important.

Ayman, Toyoko, Abdullah, Makled and Ali all use some of these. While they organize things differently, they all use cognitive strategies to help them improve. For example, they all record new vocabulary but they do it in a variety of ways. Ayman has vocabulary lists that he amasses from the day before and then tries to use in subsequent days. He changes the list every week and refers to it often. Ali, Toyoko and Abdullah all have vocabulary books they keep and refer to. They also use their English/English dictionaries and copy new lexis down. Abdullah often uses pictures for concrete nouns to help him remember them better (*See Appendix #6*) and uses contextualization to help him remember other, more complex, words (Brown, 2000). Makled uses repetition to aid him.

Ayman writes the Arabic phonemes beside new words he meets to ensure he pronounces them correctly. Since he is an auditory/visual learner, he also marks the stress and schwa sounds (Walker, 2001). His pronunciation and spelling, especially for longer words, have improved dramatically. He seeks clarification when he is in the process of acquiring new information and he records it in ways that are meaningful for him. “Different learners approach a task with a different set of skills and preferred strategies” (Lightbown and Spada, 1997:40) (Hadley, 2001).

4.2diii Communication strategies

These 6 learners want to communicate with their community members. They freely use their hands when they speak, use circumlocution to express ideas they do not have the words for and do whatever they need to express their ideas. Without using the present perfect form, Ayman was able to get his classmates to understand that he had been at out school since October 2004 by using his hands and single words. He didn't allow his lack of grammar knowledge stop him from communicating.

4.2div Socio-affective strategies

Ali encourages himself, and discusses his feelings when he feels. He searches for opportunities to use the language (speaking with Canadians at bus stops and in grocery

stores), reads novels that he borrows from the library and watches tv every night with his host family.

All of these ‘good language learners’ use the vocabulary and grammar from previous classes in their nightly journal writing. They understand that repetition and communication in various forms will help them to automatize the new structures.

“By trying to recall language and use it, learners will be able to gauge whether they have really noticed and learned the form, meaning and use. If they find they have not, they can try to get closer on all these point” (Woodward, 2001:90).

4.2e A willingness to accept feedback and respond to suggestions

Students who ask for feedback or clarification, either in their journals, or during task feedback, also advance faster than others. As Oxford states, asking questions “helps learners to get closer to the intended meaning and thus aids their understanding” (Oxford 1990:145). I am positive it is because they are taking an active role in their own learning that this is the case. When students accept and respond to feedback, they embrace their learning more and remember the language better. “The deeper the learning experience the learner has in the language, the deeper the language will sink in” (Woodward, 2001:89).

Ali often takes written feedback and contextualizes it by writing in his journal, using the vocabulary he had erred with the first time in the second piece of writing. In this way, he personalizes the information.

4.2f. A willingness or ability to tolerate ambiguity

Students who have a high tolerance for ambiguity, are willing to guess at meaning and do not need to know ‘right now’, are better language learners. They are also more relaxed and open to the experience. This is directly related to risk taking and not being afraid to make mistakes (*See #4.2b*). These learners are willing to negotiate meaning with their partners, are comfortable with guided discovery tasks and can wait to discover the answer until after they have first tried it. What is crucial is that they are provided with enough contextual clues to

assist them in the process and that they receive support and feedback. By providing this scaffolding during the tasks, they will feel safe enough to take the risks required (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). Also, by encouraging learners like Ali, who prefer to know the ‘how and the what’ before doing a task, to work with a partner who has a higher tolerance for ambiguity, we support their learning style while also encouraging them to move outside of their comfort zone. “Good language learners are often those who know how to control their emotions and attitudes about learning.” (Oxford, 1990:140)

4.2g. A willingness to actively participate

Generally, students who actively participate do better and progress faster. Students who typically shy away from doing pair work and group mingles and/or who find ways to not have to participate in class discussions, tend to improve at a slower rate. Again, this is often connected to their fear of making errors or of taking risks or of looking foolish in the eyes of their peers.

4.2h. A willingness to forge a working relationship with the teacher

Students who are able to see their teachers as facilitators rather than ‘all-knowing-gods’, are often more open to learning. The majority of the students in my classes are comfortable with the roles I embrace: facilitator, friend and confidante. There is mutual trust and respect and they know that I care about their future, their progress and their learning. As a result, most of the learners I have worked with have been willing to take risks, participate and readily ask me for suggestions regarding their learning. “Personal involvement is one very effective way of enhancing motivation” (Griffin and Keohane, 2000:1). I believe, where there is trust, there is openness for learning and growth.

Do I believe that learners can learn to be better learners and that they can develop strategies? If so, how does it happen?

5.1 Do I believe that strategies can be developed?

In a word, yes. I believe that everyone can learn to be better learners and that they can develop strategies that will help them. Teachers can assist learners by providing lots of honest praise and feedback, investing their time, engaging the learners in topics of interest to them and by being willing to see each student as an individual and helping them accordingly.

How does it happen?

5.2 Important things that I feel a teacher should do to help support students

I truly believe that teachers can play an integral role in a learner's language journey. One of the main roles we play is that of motivator – providing materials students are interested in working with and are challenged by, providing encouragement in the form of praise and feedback, and by finding ways to promote their autonomy. Seeing learners as individuals with specific needs is the first step. As mentioned, needs assessments, learning style/strategy surveys and journal writing are essential elements to any class and ones I use with regularity. Providing time in class for students to reflect on their learning is also a priority in my classes.

“If your classroom consists of learners with a range of strategy preferences, then you will need to provide a range of learning options and activities in class. This should be accompanied by opportunities for learners to reflect on and evaluate the activities”

(Nunan, 2000:170).

5.3 Strategies that I believe can be introduced and developed to help learners learn at their optimum

On top of encouraging students to take risks, embrace their mistakes and to actively participate, there are a number of specific strategies that can help them:

- Recording new information in a way that it can be accessed easily
- Learning memory techniques
- Providing tasks which promote noticing
- Making mistakes work for learners
- Encouraging peer support in the form of peer correction, pair checking and support buddies
- Teaching strategies for each of the skill areas.
- Encouraging positive self-talk

(Figure 7: Strategies that I believe help students)

5.3a Helping learners to record information

By teaching learners to copy information down correctly, to write neat notes and to vary their recording methods, we can also help them remember the information. For example, when recording vocabulary, we can teach learners to create mind maps and flowcharts and to write new words with pictures beside them. Since our long term memory is recorded visually, it is extremely helpful to include pictures or drawings when introducing vocabulary. “Linking the verbal with the visual is very useful. The mind’s storage capacity for visual information exceeds its capacity for verbal material” (Oxford, 1990:40).

Other techniques are to have students write the definition of the word, either in English or their first language and then to write a sentence using the word in an appropriate context. I encourage auditory learners to mark stress, schwas and troublesome phonemes. For some students, like Ayman, I suggest writing new words phonetically in their own script to help with pronunciation. For more analytical students, I suggest writing synonyms and other parts of speech. I encourage all students to use their English/English dictionary and to check for phonemes, stress patterns, parts of speech, contextual sentences etc. Grammar can also be recorded in a similar fashion. Using colour, icons and highlighting also helps.

5.3b Learning memory techniques

Teaching learners new memory techniques is incredibly useful. Mnemonics is a great way to teach spelling rules as are creating stories from the new words and trying to create a visual image of the word (Buzan, 1996)(Cunningham and Moor, 2003). Different techniques will, of course, work better depending on the individual's learning style.

Repetition is extremely important with memory. Seeing the word and saying it once is not enough. We need to use it, meet it in more than one situation and to use our different senses to process it. According to Tessa Woodward, "most remembering is helped by both the frequency of meeting the target items and the quality and then depth of processing of the items" (Woodward, 2001:88). Giving students reasons to remember the word is useful, as is selecting subjects your learners are interested in. "Things we enjoy or which are important for our survival" (Leiguarda, 2004:7) are easier for us to recall (Waller, 2002).

Other techniques which help learners remember new words are the use of: numbers, 3 dimensional pictures, colour, humour and positive feelings (Cunningham and Moor, 2003).

5.3c Providing tasks which promote noticing

Providing tasks which encourage and promote noticing is another set of strategies teachers can introduce. By using Guided Discovery and Task-Based lessons, rather than teacher-focused methods, we can promote learner autonomy and allow learners to extract new information as they are ready for it. By showing learners how to look for patterns and by encouraging them to devise their own, they will soon start doing this automatically (Willis, 1993) (Woodward, 2001) (Bygate, 1994). Learning strategies which can promote the noticing of patterns are: mind maps, lists, vocabulary cards, tables and charts, posters, clines and scales and techniques such as TPR (Woodward, 2001). Dictoglosses and running dictations also promote noticing, negotiation of the text and active participation.

"It pays to spend a little time helping students to notice what they have been doing in terms of language and content and why and making sure that they have an adequate

record somewhere that they can look at again on their own later” (Woodward, 2001:107).

However, leading the student to the text is not enough. We need to ensure the tasks we set will provide ample fodder for them to be able to put the information together (Thornbury, 1999).

5.3d Making mistakes work for learners and encouraging risk taking

Encouraging students to take risks and providing ample feedback are essential to their learning. Helping them to begin the process of self-correcting also promotes learner autonomy which will help them when they are alone. This can easily be done with guided correction guides for writing tasks (see Appendix #) and visual or oral feedback when learners are speaking. An example of this would be pointing to an **S** above the white board to visually remind students to add the ‘s’ for third person singular. According to Jackson,

“Self-correction fosters autonomous learning. It does this by helping students develop sensitivity to three areas: their own strengths and weaknesses, differences between their mother tongue and the target language, and the necessity for constant testing out and adjustment of their assumptions about how the target language works in the face of new information” (Jackson, 2003:18)

Encouraging mistakes and self-correction and ensuring that students understand that they are a positive aspect of learning will go a long way in building students’ confidence. Helping students to laugh at their errors, to ‘let them go’ and to see them as learning opportunities, will also help.

5.3e Encouraging peer support in the form of peer correction, pair checking and support buddies

Encouraging students to assist each other is a great way to remove the focus from the teacher, build relationships and encourage students to use their strengths. Having students help each other can help learners to feel valued, which in turn helps motivate them even further (Thornbury, 2001) (See Appendix # , page , Mathieu). Since learning should be “focused on

the development of an individual's self concept and his or her personal sense of reality" (Brown, 2000:89), having students see themselves as helpers, people with knowledge to share with each other, can only help their learning. "With a forgiving atmosphere though and plenty of risk-taking, most students can help each other towards the same shared understanding" (Woodward, 2001:112).

5.3f Teaching specific strategies for specific skills

There are many strategies that can help learners to focus on specific skills.

5.3fi Receptive skills

With receptive skills, we can teach students the difference between skimming a text/looking for the main idea and scanning a text, looking for details. We can show them how language is recycled and help them to notice synonyms etc. With listening texts, we can help learners to understand tone and intonation in order for them to be better able to infer meaning. We can use running dictations to help them to recreate texts by listening and then using logic to reconstruct the text and we can motivate them by having them bring in songs they are interested in exploring.

5.3fii Productive skills

With productive skills, speaking and writing, we need to teach students about different genres, pronominal referencing, language used for sequencing events, sentence types etc. We also need to help many of our students to "think outside the box" or to think for themselves. The biggest problem my writers have is thinking of what to say! For weak spellers, we can teach mnemonics, rhymes, general rules and to make up 'rules' for themselves. For speaking, we can teach students gambits for opening and closing conversations, stress patterns and intonation and avoidance and compensatory strategies such as circumlocution, approximation and word coinage for when they are unsure of a specific word (Brown, 2000).

5.3fiii Structure: Lexis and Grammar

To help them grow their vocabulary, we can teach them about affixes so they can begin to recognize parts of speech and the degrees of meaning. Recognizing patterns is essential and helping students to notice them will be an invaluable tool for them (Hunston, 2001). This can work for grammar and vocabulary acquisition as well as with reading and listening texts.

We can also remind our learners of all the strategies they use when they listen, read, speak and write in their own languages and encourage them to try them in English (McIver, 2001).

5.3g Encouraging positive self-talk

Last, but definitely not least, we need to encourage students to believe in themselves. There is nothing more detrimental to learning than thinking you are not capable of doing something. Helping learners to lower their anxiety with breathing techniques, providing them with positive role models and lots of encouragement, providing them with feedback in their journals and making ourselves available to listen to them can all help promote a positive self- image.

Conclusion:

Clearly, ‘good language learners’ are not a homogeneous group. Each individual brings his or her personality, needs and wants to the experience and all of it must be taken into account when the teacher plans lessons. It is, in affect, a dance and both partners need to be familiar with the steps. I believe that if students are: motivated, willing to take risks, including making mistakes, guessing at meaning and accepting feedback openly, aware of their sensory and cognitive learning styles and able to apply effective strategies to the learning process, that they will learn effectively and efficiently and, hopefully, will have fun along the way. “Motivated students whose emotions are engaged will process information and internalize new language better” (Leiguarda, 2001:49) (Nascente, 2001) (Oxford, 1990).

As Brown states,

“It has long been recognized that the most successful learners of language are those who understand their own abilities and capabilities well and who autonomously

engage in systematic efforts within and beyond the classroom to reach self-determined goals of acquisition” (Brown, 2002:vii).

Appendix #A Glossary of terms used in this assignment:

Cognitive Learning Styles:

Analytical Learner- one who looks at information in detail; likely an analytical learner would enjoy the analysis of grammar

Global Learner- one who approaches learning holistically, getting the broader view first; typically communicators who attain fluency but are not necessarily accurate

Sensory Learning Styles:

Visual Learner- one who learns through vision; pictures, posters, connecting ideas to images

Auditory Learner- one who learns through sound and speaking; conversation, listening tasks, repetition and drilling would be helpful

Kinaesthetic Learner- one who learns through doing; tactile vocabulary matches, getting up and moving, running dictations etc. would all be useful

Gardener's Multiple Intelligences:

Interpersonal- one who knows herself and others well; typically prefers to work alone or in pairs

Intrapersonal- one who works well with others and is quite social; enjoys pair and group work

Musical- one who works well with music playing; rhythmical tasks aid learning, like poetry and mnemonics

Naturalist- one who responds to topics pertaining to nature; would respond to outdoor tasks and getting out of the classroom

Linguistic: one who responds to and thinks in words, would enjoy writing stories, reading texts

Logical- one who is analytical and who sees language according to how things connect (ex. A to B to C), would enjoy ordering tasks, learning grammar through logical steps etc.

Spatial – one who relates to pictures and visuals, would likely respond to matching tasks, ordering stories, prediction tasks that use pictures or cartoons etc.

Kinaesthetic – see Sensory learning types

Strategy types:

Meta-Cognitive Learning Strategies – techniques employed before learning; organizing texts and papers, setting up the room, thinking about learning

Cognitive Learning strategies – strategies used when learning; repeating, note taking, using a dictionary

Social Learning strategies – strategies used to help aid learning; asking for clarification, working with colleagues to understand, negotiating meaning

Compensatory Strategies- communication strategies that learners use when they do not know an exact word or meaning. For example; approximating the word by using a synonym

Methods and techniques:

TPR- Total Physical Response; a method devised in the 80's to emulate how children learn their first language the idea is that learners respond to commands but are not expected to speak until they are ready.

Guided Discovery- Information is provided to the students where they must discover the information for themselves rather than the teacher telling the information directly.

Task-Based learning- Students are provided with tasks and are expected to use the language they are already familiar with. They have time to plan and execute the task and eventually report their findings to the class. The focus is on communicating while working together on the task.

Running dictation- One learner must run between the text, which is often posted somewhere in the room, and their partner. They must dictate the text while their partner writes down what they say. It is often done as a race. It promotes listening, team work and negotiating meaning.

Dictogloss- The teacher dictates a passage the students and they are expected to write what they hear. They then share their information with their partner and try to reconstruct the passage using their collective information and logic.

EFL Jargon:

Skimming- reading a text quickly while looking for main ideas and general concepts.

Scanning- looking for specific information; typically, the questions are read first and then the reader looks for key words which hold the answers

Scaffolding- layering tasks in order to provide enough support for the learner to be able to do the tasks

Automatizing- ensuring that the learner knows the information so well, through repetition and seeing the material a number of different ways over time, helps to ensure that the information is 'automatic'

Contextualizing- placing a word or phrase in a meaningful sentence in order to better understand its meaning

Personalizing: giving the learner context and a task in which to ensure the learner can bring his or her own experiences to the task

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