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## What the "Good Language Learner" Can Teach Us\*

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The differential success of second/foreign language learners suggests a need to examine in detail what strategies successful language learners employ. An indication is given of what these strategies might consist of and a list of several widely recognized good learner strategies is given. In addition to the need for research on this topic, it is suggested that teachers can already begin to help their less successful students improve their performance by paying more attention to learner strategies already seen as productive.

It is common knowledge that everyone learns his first language with a fair degree of success, the reason being that everyone is born with the ability to learn a language and then grows up in a community in which he needs to function to some degree through language, the rules of which are imparted to him in the normal course of the day. Yet, it is equally common knowledge that some people are more successful (however this is defined) than others at learning a second language.<sup>1</sup> This differential success is often explained by saying that "X has more language learning ability than Y." Yet there is something curious here: if all peoples can learn their first language easily and well (although some have more verbal skills than others), why does this innate ability seem to decline for some when second language learning is the task? Although one of the more essential skills which many people try to acquire through formal education is competence

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<sup>1</sup> This difference may not occur with very young children learning a second language in a natural setting with the kinds of communicative demands made in the use of a first language.

in a second or foreign language, the success record for attempts to help students acquire this skill has been notoriously poor.<sup>2</sup>

More positively, we can observe that this ability does not decline for all students studying a second language. We all know of students who learn a second language in spite of the teacher, the textbook, or the classroom situation. How do these individuals achieve their success? I would like to suggest that if we knew more about what the "successful learners" did, we might be able to teach these strategies to poorer learners to enhance their success record.

Good language learning is said to depend on at least three variables: aptitude, motivation and opportunity. Of the three, the first—aptitude—is assumed to be the least subject to manipulation; how subject to change it is, is a question frequently discussed in the literature. Some authors feel that language aptitude is "a relatively invariant characteristic of the individual, not subject to easy modification by learning" (Carroll 1960: 38). Others (Politzer and Weiss 1969; Yeni-Komshian 1967; and Hatfield 1965) have demonstrated that language aptitude can be improved somewhat through training; still others have pointed to the intricate interrelationship between aptitude and motivation.

There are two major tests of language aptitude currently in wide use: one by Carroll and Sapon and one by Pimsleur. That by Carroll-Sapon (Carroll 1965: 96) uses mainly linguistic parameters as criteria to predict language learning success: (1) phonetic coding, (2) grammatical sensitivity—the ability to handle grammar, (3) rote memorization ability, and (4) inductive language learning ability—the ability to infer linguistic forms, rules and patterns from new linguistic contexts with a minimum of supervision and guidance. The test by Pimsleur (1966) adds a motivational dimension and identifies three components: (1) verbal intelligence—familiarity with words and the ability to reason analytically about verbal materials, (2) motivation to learn the language, and (3) auditory ability. These tests are to be used with those who have not had prior experience with a foreign language.

While these tests are helpful in predicting success, they give the language teacher and learner little direction as to what can be done about a person's ability. Commonly, the poorer student may notice that the better student always has the right answer but he never discovers why, never finds out what little "tricks" lead the better student to the right answer. For the student who wants to improve his learning, aptitude tests don't give enough detailed information about the kinds of habits a learner will need to develop. Rather than letting him just admire the good student and feel inferior, we

<sup>2</sup>This evaluation of the success record seems to be generally agreed upon by teachers as well as students, no matter whether the success criterion is passing the course, acquiring certain skills (reading, writing, speaking and understanding) or actually putting to use what has been learned. Indeed, students in many American universities have been so dissatisfied with the profits from second language courses, they have petitioned with success to have the language requirement removed.

need to isolate what the good learner does—what his strategies are—and impart his knowledge to less successful learners.

By strategies, I mean the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge. Some of the strategies which seem to be important are the following: (1) The good language learner may be a good guesser, that is, he gathers and stores information in an efficient manner so it can be easily retrieved. He may listen to a phrase, pick out the words he understands and infer the rest. He may actively look for clues to meaning—in the topic, setting, or attitudes of the speakers. His guessing strategy may be stratified from the more general to the specific so that he gets the most information from each question or sentence. (2) He is often willing to appear foolish in order to communicate and get his message across. (3) He will try out his knowledge by making up new sentences, thus bringing his newly acquired competence into use. I will give more details on good language learner strategies later in this paper, but it is important to recognize here that tests of aptitude are meant to find the minimal number of dimensions to predict success without detailing all of the many strategies involved. If the focus is to help students improve their abilities, then these strategies should be looked at in much greater detail.

A second variable mentioned frequently in regard to good language learning is that of motivation. Several articles discuss those aspects of motivation which are essential for good language learning. Gardner and Lambert (1959) have isolated two kinds of motivation, by now well-known: instrumental and integrative. They find that the latter correlates more with successful language learning. While it is generally agreed that the best language learning occurs in the country/region where the language is spoken or when the language is the most common one at home, some would go so far as to say that the classroom is no place to learn a language. Macnamara (1971) points out that the essential difference between a classroom and the street as a place to learn a language is motivation. According to Macnamara, the student seldom has anything so urgent to say to the teacher that they will improvise with whatever communicative skills they possess to get their meaning across. However, the good language learner seems to have a high motivation to communicate, no matter where he is. The problem is how to provide the necessary motivation for others within the school framework—if that is possible. Cooper (1973: 313) also emphasizes the need factor in promoting language learning: "If we want to enable the student to use English, then we must put him in situations which demand the use of English." With proper motivation, the learner may become an active investigator of the nature of the language to be learned. Francis (1971) feels that students will learn to do what they themselves exert themselves to do.

A third variable mentioned above was opportunity. This includes all those activities both within and outside the classroom which expose the learner to the language and which afford him an opportunity to practice

what he has learned. We have all noted that the good language learner takes and creates opportunities to practice what he has learned while the poorer learner passively does what is assigned him. The good language learner uses the language when he is not required to do so and seeks opportunities to hear the language (attends foreign language movies, joins foreign language clubs, listens to T.V. or the radio, uses the foreign language with other students outside class). What is important here is to discover what advantage students take of the opportunities they either have or create. I agree with Ervin-Tripp (1970) who suggests that there has been too much attention on the input to the learner and too little on what is going on in the learner himself. She suggests that the focus on opportunity alone without considering the use that the learner is making of such an opportunity will not allow an adequate model of language learning. "Any learning model which predicts language learning on the basis of input without regard to the selective processing by the learner will not work, except for trivial problems."

If language learning is really the acquisition of communicative competence as well as of linguistic competence, then we need also to examine how the good language learner defines opportunity as exposure to many different social situations so as to get a proper feel for the circumstances in which a language code is to be employed.

It is clearly difficult to separate these three variables (aptitude, motivation, opportunity) since they do impinge on one another. An individual with lots of natural ability and motivation but with little opportunity may have difficulty in acquiring a language. If opportunity is present, but there is little motivation or poor learning skills, then we may expect that the language learning will proceed slowly. Equally, a person with lots of natural ability and opportunity may fail to learn because of poor motivation.

What is clear is that the good learner has or creates all of these and the poorer learner does not. If we are to improve the success of the classroom teaching, we will need to know a great deal more about the learning process.

### The Good Language Learner

While there is little systematic work relating language learning strategies to success, there are a number of observations which can be made about individuals who are good language learners. I have been able to isolate some of these by observing students in classrooms in California and Hawaii, by observing myself and by talking to other good language learners, and by eliciting observations from some second language teachers. As I have begun to observe classes, what fascinates me is how often the teacher plows ahead with the lesson seemingly with little awareness of what is going on in each student, and often without directing the attention of the poorer students to how the successful student arrived at his answer. That is, many foreign language teachers are so concerned with finding the best method

or with getting the correct answer that they fail to attend to the learning process. If they attended to it more, they might be able to tailor their input to their students' needs and might be able to provide the student with techniques that would enable him to learn on his own. Indeed, no course could ever teach all we need to know about a language and the teacher must find the means to help the student help himself, when the teacher is not around.

The task of observing these strategies is a complicated one because they necessarily involve cognitive processes which neither the learner nor the teacher may be able to specify. However, when our attention is focused on observing these strategies, I think we may find it easier to isolate some of them. Just recently, I discovered that by using video-tape more of these strategies would be observable than by just using a tape recorder.<sup>3</sup> With the video-tapes we hope to help learners and teachers see what is going on in the classroom. We hope to be able, as well, to abstract the learner strategies by interviewing the learner about his behavior during a particular classroom while showing him a tape of his behavior.

In spite of the fact that we are only beginning to isolate these strategies, I think that it is useful to list some of the ones found thus far. They remain general but give an idea of the kind of strategies I think we ought to be looking for.

### Strategies

1. The good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser. It seems that the good language learner is both comfortable with uncertainty (indeed he may enjoy it) and willing to try out his guesses. A good guesser is one who gathers and stores information in an efficient manner. The good guesser uses all the clues which the setting offers him and thus is able to narrow down what the meaning and intent of the communication might be. In this sense, he is carrying over into his second language behavior something that all of us do in our first language interactions. We never comprehend all that the speaker intended and we are always using whatever clues the environment, and the discourse may give us.<sup>4</sup> Guessing is based on what we know about the social relationship between the speakers, the setting, the event, the mood, the channel and all of the other parameters that Hymes has isolated for us in the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1972). It is based on what we know about the rules of speaking (Cf. Paulston, 1974, for some examples of the importance of knowing these). It is based on factual probability (Twaddell, 1973). It is also but not exclusively based on what we know about grammar and lexicon.

<sup>3</sup>I am indebted to Roger Prince, a graduate student in the English as a Second Language Program at the University of Hawaii, for his willingness to explore the use of video-tape in this research.

<sup>4</sup>What is fascinating to me is that most language classrooms discourage this normal communication strategy by telling students not to guess or by not asking the good guesser how he got there.

The good guesser uses his feel for grammatical structures, clues from the lexical items he recognizes, clues from redundancy in the message. He uses non-verbal clues, word-association clues, outside knowledge (his general knowledge of society, of similarities to his native language). He makes inferences as to the purpose, intent, point of view of a message or communication.

The ability to guess seems to relate to one's first language as much as to one's second. Mueller (1971: 153) calls our attention to the fact that people may vary in their ability to comprehend what they hear or read in their native language. The fast reader and the good listener can understand while paying attention to a minimum of cues. He can overlook unknown words, or can read even though focussing only on content words. Such a person guesses, or makes inferences about, the meaning of words or sentence structure. A wrong guess does not disturb him, but is quickly corrected from the subsequent context. Carton, who directed an important initial study on the role of inferencing in language learning, concurs: "Individual learners vary according to their propensity of making inferences, tolerance of risk and ability to make valid, rational and reasonable inferences." (1966, 18). Carton also suggests that there are three steps to guessing: (1) scanning, confirmation, and testing for adequacy, (2) assessment of probability that the inference is correct, and (3) re-adjustment to later information.

The ability to guess changes as one gets older; adults seem to stratify their guessing from the more general to the specific, gathering the most information from each question. In two separate articles, Jerome Bruner and N. H. Mackworth (1970) and F. A. Mosher and K. R. Hornsby (1966) have shown that adults use different strategies in guessing than do children and that they are more efficient guessers.

The importance of guessing and inferring has been recognized for a long time in second language learning (see for example, Twaddell 1967 and 1973) yet the details of how this is to be taught are not at all clearly worked out. Twaddell does make some fine suggestions about guessing in his more recent 1973 article. Some texts assume that guessing will take place, yet none train students directly to do so.<sup>5</sup>

2. The good language learner has a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from a communication. He is willing to do many things to get his message across. He may use a circumlocution, saying "the object on top of your head" when he doesn't know the word for hat. He may paraphrase in order to explain the different meaning of a phrase (for example, one student explained that the term "snack bar" had a different meaning in Japan than it does in the United States). He will use gestures to get his message across or spell a word when his pronunciation is not clear. He will

<sup>5</sup> The direct method assumes that the student will guess the appropriate cognates found in the target language yet never allows the teacher to refer to the mother tongue so that the guessing is expected of the student but is never a part of the teaching strategy.

use a cognate, from any language he knows, to try to express his meaning. He may not limit himself to a particular sentence construction but will use those constructions he does have to the fullest. For example, he may use "going to go" if he doesn't know the future in English, the important point being to get the message across (Richards, 1971, discusses similar strategies). He may try to form new words by nominalizing a verb or verbalizing a noun and then checking the response. Having this strong motivation to communicate, the good learner will use whatever knowledge he has to get his message across. This strategy has an important by-product in that if he is successful in communicating, his motivation to participate and acquire the necessary tools to do so will be enhanced.

3. The good language learner is often not inhibited. He is willing to appear foolish if reasonable communication results. He is willing to make mistakes in order to learn and to communicate. He is willing to live with a certain amount of vagueness.

4. In addition to focusing on communication, the good language learner is prepared to attend to form. The good language learner is constantly looking for patterns in the language.<sup>6</sup> He attends to the form in a particular way, constantly analyzing, categorizing, synthesizing. He is constantly trying to find schemes for classifying information. He is trying to distinguish relevant from irrelevant clues. He is looking for the interaction or relation of elements (using as a basis for this analysis information from his own language or others that he has learned). Naturally, the more experience a learner has with doing this sort of exercise the more successful he will be. It has often been observed that a person learns his second or third foreign language more easily than his first just because he has had practice in attending to the important formal features of a language.

5. The good language learner practices. He may practice pronouncing words or making up sentences. He will seek out opportunities to use the language by looking for native speakers, going to the movies or to cultural events. He initiates conversations with the teacher or his fellow students in the target language. He is willing to repeat. He will usually take advantage of every opportunity to speak in class; indeed, in any one class certain students seem to stand out and are called on more frequently.

6. The good language learner monitors his own and the speech of others. That is, he is constantly attending to how well his speech is being received and whether his performance meets the standards he has learned. Part of his monitoring is a function of his active participation in the learning process. He is always processing information whether or not he is called on to perform. He can learn from his own mistakes.

7. The good language learner attends to meaning. He knows that in order to understand the message, it is not sufficient to pay attention to the grammar of the language or to the surface form of speech. He attends to the

<sup>6</sup> This is what Carroll, Sapon and Pimsleur have called "grammatical sensitivity and inductive language learning ability."



context of the speech act, he attends to the relationship of the participants, he attends to the rules of speaking, he attends to the mood of the speech act. In learning one's first language, some scholars have suggested that meaning comprehension is prior to structure acquisition. Macnamara (1972) argues that an infant doesn't start to learn his first language until he can understand what is said without hearing the utterance. In the case of the second language learner, the learner already has a known structure and a lexicon which can be used to sort out some of the message. Thus, context is less prominent, although still very important for the second language learner.

He sees language as serving many functions, and he looks for ways to convey these functions. He knows that in any social interaction, there is room for the interpretation of the speaker's intention. He knows that many cues to the message are to be found in observing the nature of the interaction. There are a whole host of social dimensions which the good language learner uses to help in his understanding of the message and to enable him to frame an appropriate response.

The good language learner may try to isolate those features which give him maximum intelligibility. He may develop a feeling for those phonological cues which best enhance intelligibility. In English, this might mean that he emphasizes accurate production of intonation patterns over that of individual sounds because of the intimate relationship of these patterns with syntax. In English, some mispronunciation of individual sounds will be tolerated if intonation patterns are accurate.

There are lots of other things which the good language learner does which need exploring. Some other hints are in the literature for memorization techniques. Carroll (1966: 104) suggests that "The more meaningful the material to be learned, the greater the facility in learning and retention." It might be expected that the good language learner finds ways to make the things he must memorize more meaningful. Carroll (1966: 104) also suggests that: "The more numerous kinds of association that are made to an item, the better are learning and retention." Again we need to observe what the good language learner does to enhance associations.

### Further Research

The above list offers some good insights into the cognitive processes that seem to be going on in good language learners. A recent article by Stern (1974) lists some additional learner strategies which enhance our insights into the process. However, this is just a start and more systematic and deeper observation will need to be carried out. To do so a number of factors need to be taken into account first since it is clear that considerable variation between learners may be expected.

The learner strategies (of even successful learners) will vary with: (1) The task—some material may require rote memorization while other material may require oral drill. (2) The learning stage—language learners may in

fact use different strategies at different points in time in the learning process. (3) The age of the learner—it is probably true that adults do better guessing (having at their disposal multiple hierarchies of redundant cues) while the child has not yet developed such hierarchies. Children on the other hand may be freer in adapting to new situations and to acting out a communication. (4) The context—if second language learning takes place in the classroom with little or no opportunity for practice, the type of strategies used may well be more limited and distinct from those used where the learner has an opportunity to and perhaps has an obligation to use his language for real communication purposes. (5) Individual styles—some people are not comfortable unless they have something written in front of them or unless they have the grammatical points under consideration in front of them. Some people learn better by visual means while others learn better by auditory means.<sup>7</sup> We should expect that there would be many different kinds of "good language learners." (6) Cultural differences in cognitive learning styles—in some societies, listening until the entire code is absorbed and one can speak perfectly is a reported form of learning; in other successive approximation to native speech is used as a learning strategy; while in still others rote learning is the most common learning strategy. Good learners may have considerable insight to contribute to their learning difficulties and to their preferences for instructional methods.

By looking at what is going on inside the good language learner, by considering how he is successful, what strategies, what cognitive processes he uses to learn a language, we may be led to well-developed theories of the processing of linguistic information which can be taught to others. Perhaps we can then establish procedures to train others to use these or similar procedures to acquire a second language.

In the meantime, teachers can begin to look at what the good student does to acquire his skill. They can stop, if so doing, inhibiting the use of communicative strategies in the classroom, that is, use of all sorts of clues to guess at meaning. Rather they should encourage students to transfer what they know about the world and about communication to second language learning. I agree completely with Twaddell (1973) who says that "The learner must be allowed, must be encouraged, to accept temporary vagueness in the early stages of familiarity with a given word." Indeed, I would say that the early learner should be encouraged to accept temporary vagueness in many other areas of language learning. In this sense, he will be replicating the more natural communication process where the participants in communication do not always hear, understand or properly interpret what is being said to them; still they do not panic but continue the

<sup>7</sup> Individual learning styles are reported to be affected by several variables as well: (a) general cognitive style (b) personality traits (perfectionism, self-confidence, extroversion) (c) past school experiences (d) educational achievement (e) experience in learning other foreign languages.

conversation and see if the item becomes clarified in the course of the dialogue.

The teacher should help students understand how topic, context, mood, human relationships help him narrow down the possible meaning of a sentence, or a word. He should help the student guess what the linguistic function of a particular item might be. In this sense, the teacher would be helping the student learn how to learn a language.

When we have researched this problem more thoroughly we will be able to incorporate learning strategies into our methodology, we will be able to help the learner select the appropriate method for his own learning style and we will be able to adapt the strategy to the particular cultural learning style. The inclusion of knowledge about the good language learner in our classroom instructional strategies will lessen the difference between the good learner and the poorer one.

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