

## The Good Language Learner

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### Introduction:

It is obviously known that everyone learns his first language with a fair degree of fullness, the reason being that everyone is born with the ability to learn a language and then grow 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. However, some people are more successful than others at learning a second and a foreign language. This differential success is often explained by saying that “x has more language learning ability than y”. Yet, there are other reasons showing this differential success. In this paper I would like to explore the characteristics of the good language learner and the learning methods or strategies he uses, based on a representative sample of good language learners. This sample has been tested by the English Department students at the Arab Institute (2<sup>nd</sup> year, 1997-1998).

Both linguists and methodologists have discussed many aspects concerning the learner and the learning / teaching process.

In the seventies, researchers focused on the teaching methods.

(smith, olshtain, Bloom, sharan, later Goodman). Some attempts and researches talked about the learner; his abilities, abtitudes, talents, attitudes, interests and personality. (Schumann, Anderson, Block and Burns, Deci Nisan, Harmer and Allright), in the last twenty years, researchers focused on the good language learner. (Rubin 1979, Reves 1983, Krashen 1983).

The acquisition of a secound / foreign language takes place at a learning setting, where many social, international, economical, political and cultural factors are involved. All these factors affects the learner's attitudes towards the target language and the speakers community.

Accordingly, Spolsky 1988, believes that the language learner's success depends on these four factors:

1. Language aptitude.
2. Personal traits and abilities of the learner.
3. Affective psychological domain which results from the social environment and also determines the learners attitudes towards the new target language, culture, people and the teaching needs.
4. The supporting system for the language acquisition inside as well as outside the formal setting of school (opportunities of exposure).

Olshtain (1986) thinks that English is the language of wider

communication (L. W. C.) and it helps learners (speakers of Arabic or Hebrew) to communicate culturally, technologically and scientifically with speakers of other language all over the world using English. Although English is not the official state language, it has a great place in Israel. Therefore, there is a wide variety of supporting aids which positively influence the learners such as, cassettes, television, street signs, commercial ads, songs, computer, Internet and others. All these factors expose the learner to the foreign language in addition to what takes place in the classroom. Olshtain (1990) believes that the more the learner is aware of such needs, the greater the acquisition motive is.

Naiman (1987) claims that language teaching methods can be improved if we perceive the language learner and the learning process.

Accordingly, he questions “why do we see good and bad (less able) learners?” Carroll (1976) suggested to carry out a case study of some good language learners speaking more than one language. Thus, we can recognize clues of the conditions and the characteristics of the successful language acquisition.

Gardner (1975), Schumann (1976), and Wagner - Gough (1976) suggested the following six principles in language learning:

1. Linguistic, political and social context.
2. Learner.

3. L2 teaching.
4. L2 environment.
5. Learning.
6. Output.

Based on these principles, Rubin and Larson (1976) have revealed ten strategies of the good language learner. Here is a list of these strategies:

1. Planning strategy. A personal learning style or positive learning strategy.
2. Active strategy. He likes to be involved in games and activities. He has an active approach to the learning task.
3. Emphathic strategy. A tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language and its speakers.
4. Formal strategy. Technical Know-how of how to tackle a language. (linguistic insight).
5. Experimental strategy. A methodical but flexible approach, developing the new language into an ordered system and constantly revising it. willingness to guess, try and make mistakes.
6. Semantic strategy. Constant searching for meaning.
7. Practice strategy. Willingness to practice.
8. Communication strategy. Willingness to use the language

in real communication.

9. Monitoring strategy. Self monitoring and critical sensitivity to language use. The optimal user of the monitor according to Krashen, (1982).
10. Internalization strategy. Developing L2 more and as a separate reference system and learning to think in it and to internalize rules, tems and structures.

**The Research population:**

38 pupils (15 males and 23 females) from six eighth grade classes took part in the study. The subjects of these six classes come from four Arab schools, two junior high schools at Taybe (Alnajah and Alokhowa) and two other schools at Baka Algarbeya (A + B).

The best language learners were chosen by the English Department students (Trainee students in the practical work course) and the teacher trainers. The learners achievements in English range from 92-100.

**The Instruments:**

- a. A questionnaire given to the good language learners. The questionnaire focused on three main topics:
  - a1. Vacabulary learning.
  - a2. Understanding and learning grammar.
  - a3. General aspects about the acquisition of the English

language, which might reveal the strategies and styles used by the good language learner.

- b. Observation sheet which focuses on the degree of the learners participation, concentration and interaction in the language class.

**Findings:**

The study reveals the following findings:

1. All good language learners develop language awareness. They see language a system and therefore, they go back to their native language and learn by comparing L1 with F. L. and by translation.
2. Good language learners are willing and accurate guessers. We got answers such as: “I don’t look for translation while watching foreign films”; “I try to guess”; “I am a good guesser”; “I store information in an efficient way”; “I like to guess. Believe me, it works“.
3. Most good language learners have pointed out that they learn new words by using them in sentences. These are the accurate results.  
60% learn vocabulary by using in sentences.  
20% learn vocabulary by reading both words and meanings aloud and repeating them several times.  
20% learn vocabulary by guessing and contextualization.

4. About 80% of the successful learners have a special notebook for writing down new vocabularies, idiomatic expressions while facing difficult and unfamiliar words. The remaining 20% of the good language learners don't keep such a special notebook.
5. Good language learners like to enrich their vocabularies by looking at the derivations (words family) and not by looking at the core word only. So, while facing difficult words, they look for derivatives and not only the difficult word itself such as:  
enjoyable - (enjoy - enjoyment - enjoyable - enjoyed - enjoying - joy) .  
These learners have constant searching for meanings.
6. Good language learners have great desire to learn and practise. They like to do a lot of exercises and learning tasks by themselves. We can conclude, here, that exposure and practice play an important role in improving achievement.
7. The good language learner enjoys learning grammar by using examples, deductive and inductive methods, metaphors. 50% of the participants have shown that they rely heavily on their cognitive analytical skills and so they prefer to learn grammar inductively or deductively [example - rule/rule - example and rational reasoning]. The second half of the participants understand grammar through

analogy, examples and metaphors.

In brief, some good language learners use the cognitive perception and conception and other good language learners use the association - intuitive perception (Toben, 1996).

8. Most good language learners (85%) enjoy learning difficult and long words. They either divide the word into syllables or write equivalent pronunciation in Arabic.

The observation findings have revealed other significant aspects concerning the good language learners. These learners are able to concentrate and pay attention to the teacher the whole class. They are also able to lead their groups giving orders and offering help to the partners. They are able to take an active part in the games, activities and learning tasks carried out in class. They try to impress visitors by speaking both fluently and accurately. They easily identify language mistakes. They aren't afraid of making mistakes. On the contrary, they are willing to make mistakes in order to learn and to communicate. They try to use the target language (T.L.) and imitate their teachers. Here is a list of the impressive words and sentences they used at class.

- I would like to say
- I believe / think
- I don't agree with you.
- Actually / in fact

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- It depends
- It's really difficult / interesting
- You have to be aware of
- According to the text / writer

In addition to the questionnaire concerning the strategies of foreign language learning, another questionnaire, comprised of 15 items and administered in Arabic, was aimed at eliciting a motivation/attitude index toward learning English.

The findings of this section demonstrate that most good language learners love reading stories in English. 90% of the participants in the study said that they always read stories (one story each month). Only 10% of the participants occasionally read stories (about two stories a year).

Most Successful language learners listen to foreign songs and watch English films. All of them have pointed that they really enjoy learning English. This is a positive indicator for their high achievements.

**Summary:**

The results demonstrate that the successful learner likes the English language, enjoy learning it and highly appreciates its speakers. Therefore, he makes much efforts leading to high achievements and effective mastery of English.

The study shows that a good language learner uses certain skills

and styles. One of the most important styles is good guessing. A good guesser is one who gathers and stores information in an efficient manner. He uses all the clues which the setting offers him and thus is able to narrow down the meaning and the intent of the communication might be.

The existence of such useful strategies reminds us of the individual differences among different learners. In spite of the fact that each pupil has his own strategy (style) of learning, some strategies which the good learner adopts, can be used and applied by the less-able language learners.

Undoubtedly, the above-mentioned list of strategies offers some good insights into the cognitive processes that seem to be going on in good language learners. However, there are lots of other things which the good language learner does which need explored.

A further study could explore the memorization techniques and the morphological clues that the good language learner uses.

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