

THE GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNERS' KNOW-HOW

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Motto:

‘...er... I like speaking, if you practice speaking and ...I don't know, telling stories, movies you saw, something, you get to use the language as you would in every day life. ...and this helps a lot, because I've forgotten most of the grammar, but I know when I make a mistake because it «sounds» wrong ...’

*Excerpt from an interview taken by the author
to M.M. - a student voted as a Good Language Learner by his colleagues*

Abstract

This article is meant to share with fellow teachers of foreign languages some of the insights on the patterns of efficient learning behaviour of Good Language Learners (GLLs), as they were studied by the author within the framework of a larger empirical investigation on ways and means of developing students' awareness as far as their language learning and using strategies repertory is concerned.

The concept of GLL, its evolution and meaning in the literature are briefly reviewed, then the usefulness - for both students of the foreign language and their teachers - of learning more about Good Language Learners' know-how is discussed. Finally, a set of activities focused on GLLs' are presented and rationales are provided for each of them.

Keywords: good language learner, language learning strategies, language using strategies, strategy awareness raising activities, learner autonomy.

Defining the Good Language Learner (GLL) – points of view

There have been authors in the literature interested in the study of the Good Language Learner's (GLL) behaviour at least since the 1970s. As pointed out by the experts in language learning online [1], Rubin (Rubin, 1975) and Stern (Stern, 1975) are two of the earliest researchers who shifted their focus from teaching methods and materials to a more learner-centred aspect. Both emphasized the fact that language learners attaining success make use of a variety of language learning

and language using strategies in their study, in order to facilitate their own process of language acquisition.

Thus, Rubin (Rubin, 1975) is the first to sum up some of the main characteristics which are believed to lead to success, as they were observed during the first research activities on GLL's behaviour. For the author quoted, a GLL:

- *is a willing and accurate guesser;*
- *has a strong drive to communicate;*
- *is often not inhibited;*
- *is prepared to attend to form;*
- *practices;*
- *monitors his own speech and the speech of others, and*
- *attends to meaning.*

We should note, though, that these conclusions were somehow culture limited, but their core ideas are still valid. As one can note, the list above groups together cognitive, social and affective strategies preferred by the successful language learner.

An important piece of research in the field of what we could label today as GLLs' *know-how* is that of Naiman (Naiman, 1978), in which the most frequently used *techniques* – as they are called – are presented:

- *having contact with native speakers;*
- *listening to radio, T.V., records, movies, commercials etc.;*
- *reading anything: magazines, newspapers, professional articles, comics, etc.*
- *repeating aloud after teacher and / or native speaker;*
- *making up bilingual vocabulary charts and memorizing them;*
- *following the rules as given in grammar books or text books;*
- *having pen-pals.*

It is noticeable that the latter list comprises, besides the types of strategies in Rubin's earlier list, certain elements pertaining to one's learning process organization. They refer to the development of skills in doing or performing connected with three areas, viz. *study, practice* and *observation*.

We believe that the term *know-how* we have chosen to use in this study has the capacity of rendering not only the obvious elements for anyone who may analyze a GLL, but also those ineffable components of good language learners' behaviour which are not always visible or clear for those around them or even for themselves, but which, as a whole, contribute to attaining success in learning.

Stevick (Stevick, 1989) carried out a series of case studies, in his effort to underline that there is a diversity of approaches and beliefs that can be held by GLLs, which provide an invaluable source of inspiration for both other learners and the teachers of a foreign language, as well. It becomes clear that there is *no* unique learning way/pattern/technique etc. which works successfully for everybody.

Therefore, it is utterly important that students should realize what approach works best for each of them, while teachers should investigate the types of features as language learners their students possess/display and identify the appropriate teaching methodology which should be efficient with each/all of them.

For Stevick, the specific profiles derived from his research of certain GLLs comprise the following categories:

- *Intuitive learner;*
- *Formal learner;*
- *Informal learner;*
- *Imaginative learner;*
- *Active learner;*
- *Deliberate learner;*
- *Self-aware learner.*

Obviously, the criteria in defining these profiles are quite fused, but strategies of the cognitive, social-affective or metacognitive types are discernable in the descriptions of the GLLs' behaviour. What matters, though, is that he concludes by stressing what these profiles may involve in terms of the teacher's response. This should address different features, making full use of the positive patterns of behaviour of the students, different as they may be, which, we must admit, is no easy task for the trainer, but which, if taken into consideration, may contribute to supporting students in attaining success in learning the foreign language.

Interest in GLLs and their know-how has increased lately, as Takeuchi (Takeuchi, 2003) shows at the middle of the first decade of our century. He makes reference to the main directions of research in the field, which have been conducted in order to:

- *ascertain the strategies favoured by GLLs and the factors which may affect their use;*
- *teach strategies Cohen (Cohen, 1998); Dadour and Robbins (Dadour and Robbins, 1996); Thompson and Rubin (Thompson and Rubin, 1996), among others);*
- *investigate the culture specific differences in terms of strategies frequently used by GLLs, e.g. in North America for ESL as compared to Asia, and also the stage/level specific strategies used by successful language learners in these contexts.*

The author's conclusions underline the fact that:

... the use of some strategies is common not only to the learners in the EFL/FL context, but also to those in the ESL/SL context reported in the North American literature. For example, emphasizing fluency over accuracy at the beginning stage is a strategy ... often mentioned in the ESL/SL literature ... the use of the common strategies might well fit the underlying learning process, which is common to us all. On the other hand, the use of context-specific or environmental-unique strategies might promote the survival of learners in the environment.

Nowadays most higher education organizations in the world have specialized centres and/or sites which investigate GLLs' behaviour and provide support to their students in order to generalize good experience. This type of advice refers to academic study skills at all levels, but it also comprises differentiated per area of study recommendations, as for instance on the site [4] of a university in the UK, which refers to language learning. The sections provided on the site are good illustration of the main directions in which experts and teachers can help their students:

- ✓ *becoming an independent language learner;*
- ✓ *thinking about the way you learn;*
- ✓ *identifying ways to improve your language learning (organized by main skills, grammar and vocabulary, general approaches to learning);*
- ✓ *making the most of language learning resources.*

As can be seen from the range of strategy types above, learner autonomy and learner independence have gained increasing importance in the tertiary education context. They have taken on a number of related meanings for language learning, that include:

- *assuming responsibility for your own learning;*
- *acquiring key skills and learning strategies;*
- *learning according to your own needs and interests;*
- *using available resources and taking every opportunity to learn.*

As the site points out, research has demonstrated that language learners whose approaches to learning reflect some of these characteristics have better chances to succeed in their long-term goals.

An updated collection of the main patterns of behaviour of GLLs is synthetically presented by Shoebottom (Shoebottom, 1996-2007), who sums up the latest research in the field. He maintains that good language learners:

- *think about how they are learning;*
- *are willing to experiment and take risks;*

- *are realistic, they know that it takes time and effort to become proficient in a foreign language;*
- *are independent, they do not expect to learn by simply attending the class and do not totally rely on the teacher as a unique source of information;*
- *are organized and active, looking for opportunities to practise/use L2;*
- *have a balanced concern for communication (fluency) and (linguistic) accuracy.*

The author quoted also lists some other factors which are influential upon the *speed* at which success may arrive in learning a foreign language. Among them:

- ⇒ *duration* until the learners achieve proficiency, which itself depends on factors such as: their native language, their language learning aptitudes, how motivated they are, how many other languages they already know and so on;
- ⇒ the students' *attitude to the target language and culture;*
- ⇒ the *attitude of the learners to their new teachers and the classroom environment;*
- ⇒ the students' *personality*, in terms of (self)confidence;
- ⇒ the students' *abilities, motivation and capacity to work hard.*

Therefore, as teachers of a foreign language (in our case – English), we should be aware that a multitude of *factors* bear upon our students' success in language learning. Shoebottom divides them into:

- *internal* (age, personality, motivation, experiences, cognition, native language),
- and
- *external* ones, specific to a particular learning situation (curriculum, instruction, culture and status, motivation, access to native speakers).

The GLL as a learning know-how feedback source for both teachers and students

The activities focused on the Good Language Learner are meant, we believe, to provide valuable feedback to both the learners themselves and to their teachers. It can contribute to enhancing the quality of the teaching/learning process.

For the students, a discussion of the qualities of the GLL, included in the strategy awareness raising set of activities that comes with a teaching/learning module, is useful for a number of reasons:

- *the students observe the GLL's visible behaviour in class and/or outside it,*
- *they are given opportunities to reflect and discuss about GLLs' specific ways of learning,*

- *thus they can be persuaded to adopt some useful language learning and using strategies, or*
- *they can at least become aware of the existence of a larger strategic repertoire that may be at their disposal,*
- *they have higher chances of becoming autonomous learners when the language course is over.*

From the input students have access to (from sources such as: online help, specialized courses, embedded sets of activities in the language class etc.), students can receive the necessary information and/or examples, as well as get practice in refining their strategies as successful learners of English.

An exemplification comes from [4], where the students are firstly invited to reflect on their approach to language learning, by answering a set of questions of the following type:

- *Which language learning strategies do you already use?*
- *Which of the learning strategies below could you add to your own repertoire of learning strategies?*
- *Can you identify some of your own strengths and weaknesses in language learning?*
- *Which activities below do you think you do well; which don't you do enough of?*
- *How could you organize the time you have for language learning in a more productive way?*

These questions are based on a *Checklist of Learning Strategies*, which can include at least the following identified GLL strategies:

- *I plan my language learning;*
- *I monitor my progress in language learning regularly;*
- *I work on language learning tasks with other people (e.g. friends, people on my course), as well as on my own;*
- *I try to find opportunities to practise speaking (even to myself) to improve my fluency;*
- *I review my independent study programme regularly and change it when I find deficiencies;*
- *I try to motivate myself by setting weekly or monthly language learning goals, targets etc.;*
- *I try to adopt an active approach towards my language learning; I don't just study when I have to;*
- *I reflect on what I need to learn to meet my objectives;*
- *I review what I've learned at regular intervals;*
- *I reflect on how I learn so I can improve my learning methods;*
- *I have an organized approach to my language learning and try to think about language in terms of the different categories, systems and*

patterns within it (e.g. grammar, function, register, vocabulary, sound);

- *I try to personalize my language learning;*
- *I am willing to take risks and be adventurous with language to try out my skills;*
- *I try to learn from the mistakes I make ... etc.*

Students are then offered activities organized around the main *language skills, grammar and vocabulary* learning. Some other activities focus on different *functional areas*, such as apologizing, introducing and greeting, requesting a.s.o. Still other activities concentrate on the importance of *register* and the ways it varies according to situation (level of formality) and the relationships established among people. Information about the *culture and society* of the country whose language they learn is also a must.

Moreover, advice on their general path to learning is given, with a focus on, for instance:

- ✓ *developing an organized approach to language learning, by identifying their needs, strengths and weaknesses, by establishing objectives and by drawing up a well-timed working plan;*
- ✓ *focusing on enlarging the skills development oriented strategies;*
- ✓ *initiating a learner's diary as both evidence of progress and good opportunity to practise writing;*
- ✓ *keeping a list of the language learning achievements, to increase motivation;*
- ✓ *developing highlighting system for items of interest etc.*

Watson [12], who concentrates on advice regarding the best use of *language learning resources* available to students, lists as main sources of support: the Internet, media in the foreign language studied, self-access resources, computer-based language learning materials and, last, but certainly of paramount importance, native speakers available. For each of them, various suggestions are provided, as to the way these invaluable resources can be used in order to obtain maximum of benefit from making this effort.

For all of them, the author points out to the numerous *possibilities of using* them as useful support in learning English faster, better and in a more efficient manner. It may be of interest to briefly exemplify the kind of advice provided only as far as the Internet is concerned, as this is a means which is currently available to most of our (ESP) students:

- ⇒ *practise reading authentic, up-to-date language material;*
- ⇒ *access on-line specialist dictionaries;*
- ⇒ *study grammar in context;*
- ⇒ *extend vocabulary in a particular area;*

- ⇒ *get informal writing practice - join a chatroom;*
- ⇒ *practise reading and writing skills using the email facility - join a foreign language list, read a bulletin board in another language, strike up an email correspondence with a native speaker of the language you are studying;*
- ⇒ *tune into digital radio and TV stations around the world using a virtual tuner.*

Another aspect students should become aware of is their specific *learning style*, as many authors single out as being of significance in becoming successful learners. This is roughly defined as ‘the way that individual learners respond in a shared language learning situation, and the kinds of activities they engage in when working with language learning materials on their own’, according to *Key to Good Language Learning*.

This is equally important for the teachers, as well, as they are the ones who create most of the language learning contexts. Therefore, they must determine their students’ learning styles (and there are specialized tests to this end) and identify the best ways and means of accommodating the differences in learning styles in a group of students so that all language learners have the best chance of achieving individual success. We could argue that by fulfilling this basic requirement, such teachers have good chances of becoming *Good Language Teachers* themselves.

As a teacher, it is also important to receive feedback about the students’ learning know-how, mainly with diagnostic finalities in mind. Feedback can be obtained by:

- *observing* the students’ learning patterns in class/outside it;
- *testing them for their learning styles* and trying to generate the whole group’s core style, which could be of help in designing the course so as to be addressed to as many of the students as possible, certainly without disregarding those learners who are very different from the average profile;
- adopting an *educated eclectic approach* to the teaching of the foreign language, which should include, in a pedagogically well justified manner, designing *language learning and using strategies awareness raising activities*. Examples: GLL focused individual/group/whole class activities, interviews taken to GLLs, focus groups debating topics such as identified/necessary/recommendable strategies.

GLL focused activities at work – brief presentation and rationale

In this section a set of activities having at the center GLLs are presented, as they were designed and used in a larger piece of empirical research the author did, with the purpose of determining whether, by introducing a language learning and using

strategies package in a systematic and coherent way in an ESP one term module for engineering students, their success in learning has chances to increase.

The strategy awareness raising activities were intimately blended with the ESP specific tasks, in both explicit and implicit ways. They comprised not only GLL oriented activities, but also other patterns, among which discussions of a range of topics (e.g. on the role of homework and of portfolio, typical errors of language, good translation practices, difficulties encountered in writing various text types and ways of surpassing them a.s.o.), solving the test for determining each student's personal learning style, creating the group's learning style profile, asking students to create tasks for their peers to solve in class - for the development of their reading and listening skills. The activities based on the GLL concept included several stages. At first, a group/whole class task eliciting the students' views on the *probable features of a GLL*, the students being asked to reflect on their own learning process and compare the final list obtained with their own identified learning strategies.

At a later stage, when the students have managed to know each other better in terms of their language learning behaviour in/outside the class, a secret *vote* was organized for the *best three GLLs* in each group. It is interesting to note that, with all student groups, about five-six students were nominated as GLLs by their colleagues, if not unanimously, at least with quite high percentages of the votes. It is, we believe, an indicator of the fact that the students exposed to the strategy awareness package of activities have developed a higher awareness of what good language learning behaviour should mean.

The next step was to invite the *GLLs to prepare for an interview* that the teacher was to take them, based on a semi-structured pattern covering the following main aspects of interest:

- *Previous language experience of the students (number of years, teaching styles to which they had been exposed, types of materials, context a.s.o.);*
- *Preferred learning style - in detail;*
- *Their favourite approach to the language in particular and to learning in general;*
- *Motivation in learning English.*

During the next seminar the *interviews with the GLLs* were conducted. They were recorded and the texts were turned into transcripts, which were then used as a source of qualitative data for the research purpose, as well as for the case study based on one of the best GLLs. Having the rest of the students in the group listen to the GLLs' interview answers was considered as a useful task, as they were thus given one more opportunity to learn from the best practice of their peers.

Although one may expect that a certain feeling of reluctance might have occurred, it was not the case, as the selected GLLs had been voted by the consensus of their colleagues, which contributed to turning the interview into a useful and not threatening/frustrating class activity. Moreover, with some interviews, in the end some of their colleagues wanted to know more and compared the GLL's ideas and opinions with their own. This was beneficial in terms of increasing the students' awareness of the kind of strategies they were expected to include in their repertoire.

Finally, we designed a *case study* based on all the evidence items collected from one of the GLLs, a student whose coded name was M.M. For this case study, meant to show a profile of interest for the research, both qualitative data and quantitative data were used, all obviously coming from the same student: GLL interview answers, student diary, translation protocol, the student's identified learning style and his comments on it, answers to the student's questionnaire on their strategic repertory, portfolio items, the teacher's notes on his evolution over three study terms, evaluation results at various moments during the experiment, viz. mid-term and end-of-term tests grades.

The student jotts down in a Portfolio comment, with modesty but also lucidity and self-criticism: *'I have learned that I'm considered a GLL ... this is due perhaps to the fact that I speak so much in class...'*, he adds, displaying a good sense of humour, too, which is also significant for a GLL's profile, we believe.

He is capable of a refined self-analysis, which can be found in his Portfolio: *'My learning style is well balanced. I somehow agree to that, as when I am reading the descriptions for each of the styles, I identify in me features from all to a certain extent.'*

M.M. also possesses the capacity of absorbing new things easily: *'...although I am more reflexive than anything else, I experiment with new things, too, for instance diagrams, in order to remember info...'*

A most interesting document which we analyzed was M.M.'s *Working Protocol* during the translation activity from English into Romanian, for which the student did not simply put down the ways he was trying to solve difficulties, but designed an extremely detailed table.

He noted down with astuteness and sincerity all the problem solving modalities he was making use of during the solving of the task. His minuteness in creating a very complete protocol is demonstrated by the seriousness and patience with which he noted - for over ten times! - the same remark: *'I looked for the word in the dictionary.'* Wherever possible, though, he makes use of alternative strategies, in a flexible manner, resorting to, as he puts it: *'...common sense...guessing from the context...colleagues' opinions...teacher.'*

In time, M.M. internalized a range of strategies which he initially had not seen as useful, but which were suggested/discussed/demonstrated throughout the course. Here is evidence for that attitude, taken from his answers to a Student's Questionnaire item, when he ticked not less than 14 out of 26 strategies in the list as having been taught during the English seminars.

All the data we could put together about our subject confirmed the initial insight that a GLL is expert in making use of a wide range of language learning and using strategies, while understanding in a flexible and open-minded manner the necessity to permanently enrich the strategic repertory.

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