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ABSTRACT

Recent research that has attempted to define the good language learner can also yield information about the good language teacher. While it remains clear that there is much variation among learners, the following characteristics have been distinguished as identifying the good language learner: (1) field independence in classroom or tutored learning; (2) field dependence or empathy; (3) meaningful communication; (4) use of feedback; (5) optimal social distance with regard to the native and target cultures; and (6) self-esteem. By implication, the good language teacher can be said to: (1) be able to deal with field independence; (2) respond to the student with empathy; (3) insure the presence of meaningful communicative contexts in the classroom; (4) provide optimal feedback; (5) be sensitive to sociocultural alienation; and (6) encourage self-esteem in the student. (AM)

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THE GOOD LANGUAGE TEACHER: COPING WITH THE [illegible] OF AFFECT

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We have become familiar with the emphasis in recent methods of second language teaching, upon the affective domain. Personality variables, emotions, and interpersonal relationships are being stressed as primary factors in the success a learner has in acquiring his second language. Research on affective variables has mushroomed. From early studies on alcohol induced lowering of ego boundaries (Guiora 1972 a) and Gardner and Lambert's (1972) work on attitudes and motivation, we are now witnessing research on a host of topics: empathy, self-esteem, social distance, cognitive styles, left-right brain functioning, and studies of the "good language learner."

We have learned some positive and useful lessons from research on affective variables. Most of these lessons, in keeping with our present day penchant for focusing on learner variables, are lessons about what the "good language learner" is. Such research is, in some sense, a reaction to the focus on teaching methodologies which occupied so much of our attention in the previous two decades. But little has been said of late about the role of the teacher in second language classrooms. Since we have become increasingly aware of the pragmatic nature of language involving the interaction of learner and teacher, it is appropriate once again to examine the teacher's role in that interaction. My comments here will be built on the assumption that what we have learned about the good language learner can give us some important characteristics of the good language teacher.

Good Language Learner Research--A Mind-boggling Overview

Several years ago Joan Rubin (1975) popularized the term "good language learner" by offering seven characteristics of the person who is successful in learning a second language. She claimed, from simple observation, that the good second language learner (1) is a willing and accurate guesser, (2) has a strong drive to communicate, (3) is uninhibited, (4) attends to form, (5) practices--seeks out conversations, (6) monitors his own speech and the speech of others, and (7) attends to meaning. Notice that the characteristics imply the importance of cognitive and affective factors in second language learning.

John Carroll (1977) offered a different view of the successful language learner. He observed five features of successful learners: (1) an "ear" for language, (2) grammatical sensitivity, (3) inductive reasoning ability, (4) motivation, (5) and the following cognitive strategies-- (a) fixing attention on each detail long enough to assimilate it, (b) converting "passive" knowledge into active, productive knowledge, and (c) engaging in meaningful, live communication.

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Gardner and Lambert (1972), in their twelve years of research on successful language learning, concluded that a host of attitudinal variables contribute to motivation to learn, and that generally integrative motivation (desire to identify and integrate with the target language culture) was superior to instrumental motivation (desire to learn a second language for occupational, monetary, or technological reasons). However, other research, especially Lukmani's (1972), supported the superiority of instrumental motivation in some contexts, particularly in countries where a second language is a common educational and economic necessity (like English in India). Gardner and Lambert were careful to note, however, the difficulty of assuming that one single cluster of variables (like integrative motivation) can predict language success. "We would need a much more extensive set of personality and attitude indices to adequately interpret this complex cluster. . . . Configurations of personality traits might prove in time to be another independent dimension of importance" (1972, p. 55)

The most comprehensive attempt to identify, by carefully controlled research, characteristics of successful second language learners was undertaken by a research group at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto (Naiman, Frohlich and Stern 1975). The Toronto group administered a large battery of cognitive style and personality tests, as well as a number of structured interviews, to eighth, tenth, and twelfth grade English speakers learning French as a second language in Toronto schools. The study was somewhat disappointing in that few salient characteristics of good language learners emerged. The only two factors that were significant for all subjects in the study were field independence and tolerance of ambiguity.

At the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan a few colleagues and I are conducting research on field independence, empathy, self-esteem (Heyde 1978), and social distance (Acton 1978). So far it appears that field independence (the ability to perceive relevant and distinct parts of a whole, embedded in a distracting cognitive "field") is a necessary cognitive style for the usual classroom-oriented language learning, but that field dependence (the ability to perceive the total "field" and to perceive empathically the thoughts and feelings of other people) is necessary for effective communication in "natural", untutored contexts. High self-esteem and an ability to achieve an optimal social distance are also apparent necessities for successful second language learning.

The number of possible variables that could describe the "good language learner" are mind-boggling. There seems to be no one set of correct answers. I will attempt, therefore, to synthesize what the above and other studies of good language learners seem to have shown us.

On Defining the Good Language Learner

Studies of good language learners have shown us, for one thing, that it is probably impossible ever to define such a learner. I am reminded here of Peter Strevens' anecdote of the zoologist who was asked to define a dog. After much pondering the zoologist could do no better than to define a dog as "a four-legged animal recognizable as a dog by other dogs". At times the good language learner seems best defined as the learner who is recognized to be such by his teachers and fellow learners. And often teachers do have a rather uncanny, intuitively accurate perception of who the "good" and "bad" learners are in the classroom. But I think we can pinpoint a number of both salient and relevant characteristics of good learners.

We have learned that there is tremendous variation among learners and even in individual variation in the affective factors involved in second language learning. And we know that the effect of affect is highly significant. Following are six possible distinguishing characteristics describing the good language learner (hereafter GLL).

1. Field independence. The GLL is field independent in classroom or tutored second language learning. Field independence, you will recall, can be perceptual or cognitive. In the perceptual domain, finding a certain figure "hidden" (embedded) in a jumble of criss-crossing straight lines would require a field independent style. Field independence is a common cognitive characteristic of most successful classroom learning of any kind. Exercises, drills, tests, and other classroom activities require field independence. Perception of rules through analysis requires field independence. The second language learner needs field independence in order to "monitor" his second language learning process.

2. Empathy and field dependence. The GLL is also empathic in his ability to "step into another person's shoes," or to engage in "a process of comprehending in which a temporary fusion of self-object boundaries permits an immediate emotional apprehension of the affective experience of another." (Guiora 1972 b: 142). Empathy is crucial to the process of communication, for it is by means of cognitive and affective empathy that the assumptions are made from which effective communication emerges. Field dependence is highly correlated with empathy. It is reasonable, therefore, to include field dependence and field independence as necessary styles for the GLL, even though the usual conception of field independence and dependence puts them in complementary distribution to one another.

3. Meaningful contexts of communication. The purpose of language is to function as communication between and among persons. Language serves a meaningful and pragmatic purpose and learning a second language is only successful when the learner is caught up in a communicative context.

4. Feedback. Meaningfulness in language is a function of feedback. When we utter something it is for some effect and we determine that effect by the feedback--the response or reinforcement--we get in return. If we ask a question we expect a response; if we make a statement we expect some indication from the hearer of comprehension of the statement. The second language learner needs feedback on both the function of language and the form of language. The shaping of correct forms of language will of course help the learner to achieve the meaningful and communicative functions of language. The negative and positive reinforcing effects of feedback will determine the acquisition of both form and function.

5. Optimal social distance. It has long been recognized that language learning and culture learning go hand in hand. Recently some have suggested that the "distance" between cultures is a factor in second language learning--the greater the social distance the more difficult the task of both language and culture learning. The new "identity" that the language learner has to acquire will be eased by lessened social distance. Acton (1978) has suggested that social distance should be viewed in terms of where the learner perceives himself to be between the native and target cultures and that there is an optimal distance for successful language learning, where the learner is neither too close nor too far from either culture. The GLL thus appears to be one who can achieve this optimal tension between two cultures.

F. Self-esteem. Finally, studies have shown that self-knowledge and self-confidence are at the heart of communication. Self-esteem is therefore an extremely important factor in the successful acquisition of a second language. Heyde (1978) demonstrated a positive relationship between high self-esteem and successful language learning. The second language learner needs to have a feeling of "I'm OK" in order to engage in meaningful linguistic encounters.

Implications for the Good Language Teacher

The description of the good language learner implies certain characteristics of a good language teacher. How should the teacher interact with the learner to cope with the effect of affect? Galileo said that "You can not teach a person anything. You can only help him discover it within himself." A similar observation was made by Carl Rogers who, in respect for the freedom and dignity of every learner, postulated that the goal of education is the facilitation of learning, and that the educated person is one who has learned how to learn, and that real learners--creative scholars and practitioners--emerge from an interpersonal context of learning. Rogers defined a "good" teacher as a person who is a genuine, real person with his students, who establishes a facilitator-learner relationship born of an abiding trust and acceptance, and who communicates in a climate of empathic understanding.

In view of these observations the affective traits of a good language teacher emerge, traits which follow those of the good language learner. A definition of a good language teacher (hereafter GLT) will therefore be attempted here, but only in respect to the affective characteristics of the GLT. No attempt will be made, for example, to deal with the subject matter knowledge which the teacher must have in order to teach. One can possess all the characteristics outlined below and, lacking expertise in the subject matter--the language, the principles of language learning, methods, techniques--still be a failure.

1. Dealing with field independence. The GLT recognizes and deals with the field independence of classroom learning. Educational settings demand the learner's focus on specific factors within the field of language. Textbooks, methods, techniques--especially classroom drills and exercises, and tests all are field independently oriented. For some learners this means changing from socioculturally determined modes of learning--a traumatic breaking out of molds determined by childhood. Learners and teacher together need to face such realities and deal with them openly.

2. Empathy. The learner needs to express empathy in order to communicate and the GLT to reciprocate with a high degree of empathy. By lowering his own ego boundaries, the teacher can communicate effectively and openly with students. But the teacher must really be more than cognitively empathic; he needs to value and to prize students.

3. Meaningful contexts. Since the learner acquires language for communicative use only in meaningful contexts, the teacher must take measures to insure the presence of those meaningful contexts in the classroom--no easy task. The task implies attending to the deep structure of communication and to the intended meaning of speakers. Teachers are sometimes prone to attend too meticulously to forms of language, which can be detrimental to communication. A schoolteacher in Detroit once asked her pupils to write some sentences down on a piece of paper. One shy little boy responded to her directive by saying "Ain't got no pencil." Whereupon the teacher, in stern reproof, said "You don't have any pencils, I don't have a pencil, they don't have pencils..." Withering and mystified by this barrage of reprimands the boy finally said "Ain't nobody got no

pencils?" He was using language as a tool for real communication. The teacher was regarding the boy's language as a set of forms, some of which were erroneous.

4. Feedback. In both first and second language acquisition, feedback is of key importance and the teacher, as the main provider of feedback to the learner, takes on a crucial role. It is by perception of a teacher's feedback that a learner shapes and modifies hypotheses about the language. A teacher's feedback needs to be optimal: overcorrection or undercorrection, for example, can either smother communication or fail to provide enough reinforcement, respectively. Feedback can be both affective and cognitive. Affective positive feedback says, in essence, "I value you and your attempt to communicate", and that kind of feedback is essential for communication. Cognitive feedback can be positive ("I understand, continue" or negative "I don't understand"). Both positive and negative cognitive feedback are appropriate in differing circumstances. Optimal cognitive feedback combined with positi affective feedback will enhance the language learning process.

In giving feedback the teacher has to tread a fine line between the form and function of language. He needs to encourage practice in the functions of language but provide enough cognitive feedback to lead the learner to clear articulation of forms, all without stifling the learner's communicative urges.

5. Sociocultural alienation. Alienation of a number of different varieties is a natural byproduct of language learning. One of the most difficult types of alienation which the teacher has to cope with is sociocultural alienation--the shock and malaise produced by the contact with a second culture. The attitudes and biases which learners have are often the product of their own culture. Teachers need perhaps above all other kinds of awareness to be aware of and to cope with sociocultural and affective attitudes in the learner. For children as well as adults, the failure to learn a second language is rarely a cognitive failure. It is an affective failure. Literally millions of people all over the world--both children and adults--learn second languages efficiently when the affective factors--the social, political, emotional and cultural values--are positive. It is encumbent upon the GLT to understand, relate to, empathize with, value, and prize the learner whatever his sociocultural attitudes and biases may be.

6. Self-esteem. Self-esteem encompasses all five aspects above. Without self-esteem no one can learn much of anything effectively. Earl Stevick (1976) described a kind of alienation within the learner, "between me and myself: between the performing me and the critical me who is observing the performance and scolding the performing me for its lapses; between the me who is striving to be adequate and the me who has internalized other people's ideas of what adequacy is." (pp. 227-228)

This self has defenses. The learner has defenses. The teacher has defenses. Barriers are raised in self-protection. The GLT will, by an interpersonal relationship with learners, be conscious of the defenses on both sides and "reduce alienation among teachers and students, make it less necessary for me [the student] to defend myself, and leave me with an increased feeling of wholeness and worth." (Stevick 1976: 229)

Conclusion

Let me end with a word about the elusiveness of all these characteristics of the good language teacher--and learner, too, for that matter. Human behavior at its deepest and most meaningful levels will not in our lifetime be predicted

and controlled. What we can attempt, however, and what I have attempted to do here, is to understand ourselves better. Roger Brown (1966: 326) put it in a very interesting way: "Psychologists find it exciting when a complex mental phenomenon--something intelligent and slippery--seems about to be captured by a mechanical model. We yearn to see the model succeed. But when, at the last minute, the phenomenon proves too much for the model and darts off on some uncaptureable tangent there is something in us that rejoices at the defeat."

I think that teachers of English as a second language, even the good teachers, can rejoice in defeat for some years to come.

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