HELPING STUDENTS TO LEARN

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BACKGROUND

In the last 40 years, there has been a concerted effort to develop a language teaching method that would be the definitive one. Closely influenced by various schools of linguistics, methods came into fashion only to be replaced by others which sometimes openly condemned previous methodology.

What particularly frustrated linguists and specialists in language methodology was that a particular teaching method could achieve excellent results in one situation but sometimes quite the reverse in others. In fact, common sense suggests that this must inevitably be the case, since success in language learning depends on complex circumstances and it is inconceivable that any single method could achieve optimum results in all situations. Where there are different kinds of pupils, teachers, objectives and materials, there can be no universal method.

An obsession with methodology was matched by an exaggerated idea of the teacher's role in the learning process. The tendency was to think that if learners were not learning the target language, then the methodology was at fault or the teacher was to blame in some way. That may, of course, be true but such an attitude ignores the fact that the success of the learning process has three principal determinants:

- the learner
- the teacher
- interaction (methodology, classroom, materials)

To a very large extent the importance of the first determinant — the learner — was ignored.

LEARNER TRAINING

The latter part of the 1970's and the early 1980's saw a change in direction and the focus of attention turned towards the learner. Researchers began to take interest in learning strategies and the twin concepts of learner autonomy and learner responsibility were given more importance. Motivation was seen as an important factor determining success in language learning. Learner training was conceived and became a viable activity.

Wendon[1] (1986) and Ellis and Sinclair[2] (1989) emphasised the importance of learner training and identified its aims as being to make learners aware of the factors that affect their learning and discover learning strategies that might assist them.

Learner training suggests that as an individual, each learner should follow a unique path and develop a flexible approach that serves his or her requirements. It also suggests it is worth involving the learner in the learning process because then he or she will be able to play a more effective role.

Training learners to learn results in them being in a better position to take control of their own learning, which means that they can continue learning outside the classroom.

In addition, because they are more informed about language learning in general, they will be more critical of strategies that appear to have no relevance to their needs. They will have the confidence and the knowledge to reject them in favour of others that do.

THE «GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNER»

Naiman[3] et al. (1978) had suggested that clues to effective learner training might be obtained from studying the approach and strategies of what were called «good language learners»: those who have managed to learn more than one language successfully. Studies were carried out which produced information about the characteristics and learning strategies of such learners. Perhaps the most significant finding was that each learner develops strategies and techniques which suit his or her individual needs and personality and implements these in different ways. As a result, it is not possible to draw up a list of definitive language learning strategies, although it is possible to make certain generalisations.

Good language learners are thought to be:

1) *Experts on themselves*

They can analyse their own attitudes towards language learning and are aware of their strengths and weaknesses. This «self-knowledge» enables them to find a style of learning that suits them. It also makes them adaptable in different learning situations.

2) *Hungry for knowledge*

They are interested in working out how the target language works, by using a deductive approach. They develop techniques that help them to memorise vocabulary and learn grammar rules which they can apply. If they are unsure, they make guesses and then ask people to correct them. They listen to native speakers and compare what they say with themselves. Above all, they remain inquisitive and intellectually energetic.

3) *Realistic*

They know that learning a language is not easy and takes time, hard work and effort. Therefore the personal goals they set themselves are realistic and attainable, which avoids

[1] Wenden, A. L. 1986a. *Helping language learners think about learning,* ELTJ, vol. 40, 1:3-12.

[2] Sinclair, B. and Ellis, G. 1989. *Learning to Learn English.* Cambridge.

[3] Naiman, N., Fröhlich, M., Stern, H.H. and Todesco, A. 1978. *The Good Language Learner.* Research in Education Series, 7. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

disappointment. They try to remain motivated and overcome negative feelings, such as frustration or a lack of confidence. They look for and expect progress, not failure.

4) *Anxious to communicate*

In the early stages they do not worry about making mistakes. Their priority is to communicate and get as much practice as possible. They push themselves to take risks and do not view failure as a setback. Above all, they try to think in the language and not translate.

5) *Confident*

They have the confidence to tolerate differences between their native tongue and the target language. Feelings of uncertainty or confusion are seen as a natural part of learning and do not hinder progress.

6) *Actively involved*

Their involvement in learning the language extends beyond the classroom. They see learning as being an on-going activity that occupies them fully, all the time. Practice activities are chosen as a means to an end because they will help them with a particular problem, rather than as an end in themselves.

7) *Organised*

Time and materials are organised to suit the learner and in such a way that the best use is made of them.

STUDENT AUTONOMY

It is obvious that the success or failure of a learner-centred approach is dependent on certain factors. One of these is the willingness of the teacher to provide the initiative and, when necessary, to train students so that they are in a position to be autonomous learners. Equally, student profile and acceptance of their newly-defined role is crucial, if the teacher's efforts are to be rewarded. Learner autonomy, by its very nature, demands a sense of responsibility, and a high level of motivation and maturity. Young children at secondary school level are less likely to be ready to accept the role of autonomous learner than university students. Young, immature learners could be in danger of misinterpreting the new-found freedom offered by student autonomy as an invitation to make less effort in their language learning. University students, on the other hand, should theoretically be ideal candidates to react favourably to the demands placed upon them by learner autonomy.

ORIENTATION COURSE

For the past four years I have conducted an orientation course for first year students lasting 1-2 weeks at the start of the Academic Year. During initial discussions with students, it

soon became apparent that such concepts as learner responsibility or autonomy were completely new to them. During the four years I have been running the orientation week, I have never found a student who had previously received any training as a language learner. Indeed, none had had any formal training whatsoever in study skills. On being asked what is the best way to learn English, a common reply was «to go and live in the country where the language is spoken» or alternatively «to watch television programmes and films spoken in the target language». If it was as simple as that, I pointed out, there would be no Portuguese immigrants in London who had failed to master the language of their host country. Equally, most of the Portuguese population would be fluent in English, judging by the number of English language films and television programmes they are exposed to.

The majority of students had not given any thought to the problem of learning a language in a formal situation, such as a classroom. They confused the process of acquiring a mother tongue with the task of learning a foreign language, often in less than ideal circumstances. For many of them, the orientation course was the first time in their language learning careers that they had given serious thought to what they did. Ironically, seven or more years of learning English had already passed and, considering they were university students, they had been relatively successful at something they had never analysed or thought about before.

Topics and discussions during the orientation period can be summarised as follows:

1) *Analysis of a student's own perceived approach.*

This was difficult because many students were not able to analyse their own approach to language learning. Most admitted to having been heavily teacher-dependent in the past and ready to follow the teacher's lead. This was natural after having come straight from secondary school, where the teacher is traditionally seen as a figure of authority and the centre of attention. Many had unconsciously become more autonomous in their learning when they had had a «bad» teacher, whom they felt was not teaching in a way that coincided with an approach acceptable to them. In other words, in the past they had been happy to be teacher-dependent but only so long as the methodology chosen by the teacher was felt to be producing results.

2) *Alternative language learning methods.*

It was only after discussions about different methods that students realised there is no single, definitive answer to the problem of how to learn a foreign language. Instead, they learnt that there are alternative «approaches» and it is up to the learner to identify which one is most likely to work for him or her. This requires an awareness of methodology but perhaps more important, an ability to analyse oneself as a language learner. The correct approach is intrinsically bound up with personality, attitude and instinct for what one feels comfortable with: it is a personal thing.

Language learning methods discussed were:

- Audio-lingual method
- Direct method
- Eclectic method
- Grammar translation method

3) *Language learning compared to other learning experiences.*

Initial discussions on this topic centred on trying to analyse the nature of language learning. Questions came up such as:

- Is language learning an academic subject?
- Do you have to be intelligent to learn languages?
- How similar is learning a language to:

    a) Learning linguistics (an academic subject).
    b) Riding a bicycle.
    c) Programming a computer.
    d) Learning to play a musical instrument.

In most cases, discussions were inconclusive, in that they provided no clear answer to the questions above. However, the real reason for discussing them was to focus students' attention on the language learning process itself. If any conclusion could be drawn, it was that we might learn different activities or subjects in different ways and as such, learning a language is not exactly the same as learning anything else. Therefore it deserves individual attention.

4) *The profile of the «good language learner».*

The profile is described in detail in the earlier part of this paper. Initial student reaction to it was of amusement. Nevertheless, after discussing the qualities in greater detail, students grudgingly admitted that most of it made good sense. The point they made, which is valid, is that many of the qualities described by the profile of the «good language learner» are innate and cannot be acquired. In short, good language learners are born, not made.

5) *The importance of personal factors.*

Personal factors affecting a learner's progress were discussed under the following main headings:

a) *Ability to learn a language*

Virtually everyone is born with an inherent «language acquisition device» (LAD) and unless severely handicapped in some way, manages to learn his or her mother tongue. There is still some debate about whether this LAD atrophies in later life or changes in some way but it remains a fact that human beings retain the capacity to learn a new language until they die, although this capacity may be severely limited. Obviously many other important factors play a part, such as environmental conditioning, opportunity, education, culture and so on. The relationship between the LAD and the ability to learn a second language is little understood, but it would be reasonable to assume that some people are born with a talent for languages, just as they are born with musical or artistic talent.

b) *Age*

Advancing age is sometimes considered to be one of the main reasons for failure to make progress. «Languages should be learnt young» is commonly heard advice and one

that general experience seems to bear out. Nevertheless, maturity and intellectual powers, experience and emotional development, play an increasingly important part at advanced levels and it can happen that young students are at a disadvantage. The mechanics of language learning may be the province of the young but when it comes to communicative and analytical skills, the older student may be more effective.

c) *Previous linguistic experience*

Common experience suggests that each additional foreign language learnt presents a lighter learning load than the previous one. This is particularly the case where languages share similarities. Certainly, learning several languages provides valuable learning experience which can be brought to bear on the learning of each new language.

d) *Personal learning rates*

Individuals perform tasks at different speeds and there is no reason to suppose that language learning is any different. Learners may also be relatively fast or slow at different points in their language learning careers.

e) *Preferred learning strategies*

Students differ in their qualities of temperament, preference and interest. Some like learning by participating, particularly in oral work; others prefer to remain silent observers. Some write everything down; others try to commit to memory. Where those preferred strategies do not coincide with the approach adopted by the teacher, then progress may be impeded and the student feels tense.

f) *Personal circumstances*

Language learners have their own share of personal problems and worries and when they enter the classroom they may be already under stress for a varying number of reasons. Given that learning a foreign language is in itself stressful, then it is not surprising that some students are unable to concentrate or participate fully during a class. Progress is inevitably affected.

g) *Relations with teachers and fellow-learners*

Perhaps more than in any other classroom situation, it is important that the learner should feel relaxed and not threatened in any way. There is always the fear of making a fool of yourself or being held up to ridicule. Obviously no competent teacher would allow this to happen but it remains a fact that some students may feel ill at ease and out of place.

6) *Extending the learning experience to outside the classroom.*

The point was made that students should be aware that the learning process does not begin when they enter the classroom and end when they walk out. They should be prepared to study at home in their own time and reflect on the work done in the classroom. Also, their exposure to the English language is not restricted to the 120 hours they spend in the company of the teacher and fellow students. On television there are many English programmes, so instead of reading the subtitles, students can concentrate on listening to the English. Again, they should be prepared to

read English books, magazines and newspapers and take the trouble to note down and look up any new vocabulary they may encounter.

7) *Motivation as a factor determining progress.*

Apart from the absolute level of motivation, which, in some cases, may be completely lacking, the type of motivation (sentimental or integrative) may negatively affect a student's progress where he or she perceives that the approach adopted by the teacher does not coincide with expectations.

Associated with motivation is the willingness to make an effort and work. Many students have the idea that learning a language requires little effort beyond attending classes and doing the necessary homework. They hold the view that a language lesson is like getting on a bus — when the ride is over, you get off.

8) *The role of the teacher.*

By the end of the orientation course, many of the students had modified their perception of the role of the teacher. They realised that the teacher could not be the only one responsible for progress in their learning and that it is sometimes a convenient excuse to blame past failure on having had a «bad teacher». If anything, having a «bad teacher» dramatically increases the need for learner training and responsibility.

Nevertheless, they still expected their teacher to be an expert on the language as well as having the ability to make classes interesting and therefore motivating. Class management skills were also given a high priority by students.

9) *How language classes relate to other subjects on the course.*

This was a part of the orientation course that provided interesting discussion. Most students could see a direct relationship between Language, Literature and Linguistics. The connection between socio-cultural subjects and language was less obvious. The important thing that came out of the discussions was that relationships between subjects should be a two-way affair, with language making a contribution to other subjects, which is nevertheless reciprocated. In particular, students could see the potential for this with Literature and Linguistics.

10) *Study skills.*

Discussion revolved around the following topics, which students were required to answer:

a) How do you use your dictionary?
b) Which grammar book(s) should you use and how?
c) What other resources have you got?
d) How do you organise your material? (grammar, vocabulary, reading)
e) How do you organise your time?

FOLLOW-UP

After the orientation period was concluded, I made repeated references to the concepts that had been discussed whenever the opportunity arose during the remainder of the Academic Year. This was to remind students that they should remain critical, alert and still in charge of their own learning. Without constant reminders, there is a tendency to drift along and take a passive approach because this requires less effort from the learner.

One month before the end of the Academic Year I asked students to complete a question-naire, a copy of which can be seen in Appendix I. The questionnaires remained anonymous, as I did not want the response to be influenced by students trying not to upset me, the teacher, who was to be responsible for their final assessment. As far as possible, I wanted the answers to be genuine and accurate, although in practice this is impossible to achieve, as so many election pollsters have found to their cost and embarrassment.

Forty-three students completed questionnaires and as can be seen in Table 1 Appendix II, the overwhelming response to discussions during the orientation period was positive. The vast majority of students found them to have been «quite useful» or «very useful». Even when discounting a student's natural desire to please the teacher, this is an encouraging result.

Significantly, 72.0% admitted that discussions had changed their approach to learning English, which is another way of saying that their awareness had been increased and they were no longer blindly following the teacher's lead without giving some thought to what they were doing. This, in itself, represents a radical change of approach.

Two opposing language learner profiles (Description 1 and Description 2) were presented and students were asked to identify with one of them. These profiles describe and identify the split between the instinctive approach and the cognitive one. As can be seen in Table 3 Appendix II, students were almost equally divided, with 51.2% choosing Description 1 (instinctive) and 48.8% Description 2 (cognitive). This is contrary to what one might have expected, given that the sample was made up of University students.

Table 4 in Appendix II shows the correlation between «score» in Section A (how useful students found discussions) and answers to Section B and C. The «score» in Section A was calculated in the following way: 1 mark was awarded for a not useful reply, 2 marks for a quite useful and 3 marks for a very useful. The sample was divided into two groups: those with scores in the range 20-24 and those with scores in the range 17-19.

Not surprisingly, more in the 20-24 group (80.7%) admitted that they had changed their approach as compared to 64.7% in the 17-19 group. Yet 5 students (19.3%) had found the discus-sions useful but had not changed their approach to language learning.

Perceived «instinctive» and «cognitive» learners divided fairly equally between the two groups (divided according to score in Section A).

Table 3 in Appendix II shows the correlation between answers to Section C (perceived learner profile) and answers to section B (admission that discussions had changed approach). It can be seen that more of the «instinctive» learners admitted they had changed their approach (77.2%) as compared to «cognitive» learners (66.6%).

CONCLUSIONS

The questionnaire was not sufficiently detailed to allow any further conclusions to be drawn. In addition, the sample batch (43 students) is small. However, despite the scientific limitations

of the questionnaire, it does clearly point to the validity of having a period of initial training in language learning skills, when students are introduced to the concept of learner responsibility. Ideally, this is best undertaken early in a student's course, preferably at the beginning of the First Year.

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Appendix I

During the first two weeks of this year, we discussed the importance of developing *language learning skills*. This questionnaire relates to the importance of those discussions.

A) Please answer the following questions as honestly as you can using a pen or pencil.
How far did you find a discussion of the following topics useful?

	not useful	*quite useful*	*very useful*
1) Analysis of your *own* approach to language learning	❏	❏	❏
2) Discussion of *alternative* approaches to language learning	❏	❏	❏
3) Learning about the profile of the «good language learner»	❏	❏	❏
4) Extending the language learning experience to outside the classroom	❏	❏	❏
5) Motivation as a factor determining progress	❏	❏	❏
6) The role of the teacher	❏	❏	❏
7) Organising your vocabulary	❏	❏	❏
8) Organising your grammar patterns	❏	❏	❏

B) Did anything discussed *change* your approach to learning English?   YES / NO
(please delete)

C) Which description best describes you?   DESCRIPTION 1 / DESCRIPTION 2
(please delete)

DESCRIPTION 1
You believe that language is best learned by using it to communicate. You do not think about language form or the purposes of learning but feel you should take advantage of every opportunity to practise and not worry about making mistakes. As far as possible you try to avoid thinking in your native language. For you learning a language is an unconscious process.

DESCRIPTION 2
You believe language learning should be in a logical progression, starting with grammar and vocabulary. In other words, learning a language means learning about it — you want to understand how it works. Practice is important but only to help you remember the vocabulary and language you have already learned. For you learning a language is a conscious process which requires hard work. You advise being open to receive new language and remaining mentally active so you can manipulate or transform in some way new words and structures in order to understand and remember them. Achieving these tasks will result in successful communication.

Appendix II

Results of the questionnaire given to students to ascertain how useful they found the orientation period at the beginning of the Academic Year.

Question A	Not useful	Quite useful	Very useful	Total replies
1)	0	28 (65.1%)	15 (34.9%)	43
2)	0	27 (62.3%)	16 (37.7%)	43
3)	1 (2.3%)	29 (67.4%)	13 (30.0%)	43
4)	1 (2.3%)	9 (20.9%)	33 (76.9%)	43
5)	1 (2.3%)	14 (32.6%)	28 (65.1%)	43
6)	0	20 (46.6%)	23 (53.4%)	43
7)	0	18 (41.9%)	25 (58.1%)	43
8)	1 (2.3%)	18 (41.9%)	24 (55.9%)	43

Table 1: *Replies to questionnaire — Section A.*

Question	Yes	No	Total replies
B)	31 (72.0%)	12 (28.0%)	43

Table 2: *Replies to questionnaire — Section B.*

Question	Description 1	Description 2	Total replies
C)	22 (51.2%)	21 (48.8%)	43

Table 3: *Replies to questionnaire — Section C.*

Score Range	Yes	No	Description 1	Description 2
Range: 20⇔24				
26 replies	21 (80.7%)	5 (19.3%)	12 (46.2%)	14 (53.8%)
Range: 17⇔19				
17 replies	11 (64.7%)	6 (35.3%)	10 (58.8%)	7 (41.2%)

Table 4: *Correlation between score in Section A and answers to Sections B and C.*

Description	Yes	No
Description 1 (22 replies)	17 (77.2%)	5 (22.8%)
Description 2 (21 replies)	14 (66.6%)	7 (33.4%)

Table 5: *Correlation between answers to Section C and answers to Section B.*