Section II:
Language-Learning Strategies
Strategies for Language Learning and Use and
Styles- and Strategies-Based Instruction

Does the 'Good Language Learner' Exist?

Initially, learning French was a lot of nitty gritty details. Immersion was the key for me. I got involved in events and in speaking up even when I was not comfortable. Not only did I study abroad, I also taught in Cameroon and in France. Some of my closest friends are native French speakers and we stay in touch by phone, e-mail, letters, and special trips. I still maintain my fluency ten years later with a real purpose for communicating in French. ~ Tracie DeVine, native English speaker

I went into my first language class and made a promise to myself that I would speak this language without an accent. I went on to become not only fluent in English, but also Latin, French, and have just passed intermediate Arabic. My fluency and ease with English enabled me to study abroad. ~ Gabi Schmiegel, native German speaker

These students, through their motivations and ability to deal with inhibitions, became good—if not excellent—language learners. This chapter highlights the importance of understanding the latest conceptualization of what it means to be a good language learner. The objectives of this chapter are to:
- Describe characteristics of good language learners
- Connect the characteristics of good language learners to strategies-based instruction

The notion of the 'good language learner'
Most researchers have rejected the notion of a single profile of the "good language learner" because over the years research studies have shown that there can be striking differences among equally successful language learners (for example, see Macaro, 2001). Rather than limiting the description of the good language learner to one that is prescriptive and ignores learner differences, the more recent and inclusive view is that there are various ways that language learners can be successful. For the most part, these learners are strategic in their learning. Rubin (1975) identified the following strategies used by good language learners:
- Making reasoned guesses when not sure
- Making an effort to communicate and to learn through communication
- Finding strategies for overcoming inhibitions in target language interaction
- Practicing the language whenever possible
- Monitoring their speech and that of others
- Attending to form (i.e., grammar)
- Paying attention to meaning

The important thing to realize about this list or other more recent lists is that good language learners do not necessarily use the same language strategies. Even if they use the same strategies, they may not use them for the same purposes nor in the same way. For example, one learner focuses on form only while reading and writing, while another does so while listening and speaking as well. While

the first learner focuses on form in a global way, the second learner is far more analytical and pays attention to minute details associated with the forms and rules associated with their use.

Research on strategies for effective language learning has focused on (1) the identification, description, and classification of strategies; (2) their frequency of use and the learner's success at using them; (3) differences in language proficiency level, age, gender, and cultural background that might affect their successful use of strategies; and (4) the impact of language strategy training on student performance in language learning and language use.

Whether the strategies that a given learner selects are successful depends on many factors, including:
- Nature of the language task (its structure, purpose, and demands)
- Characteristics of the learner such as learning-style preferences
- Language-learning aptitude
- Prior experience with learning other foreign languages
- Motivation to learn this language, cultural background, age, and personality characteristics
- Language being learned
- Learner's level of language proficiency

No single set of strategies will be appropriate for all learners or for all tasks. Students need to learn how to apply strategies according to what actually works for them. This is where you as a language teacher come in: to explicitly teach learners to be more aware of their learning-style and language-strategy preferences. As a Spanish teacher found in self-reflection after a seminar on styles- and strategies-based instruction, learners need a great deal of guidance.

> …I have used strategy training with my students in the past. However, the difference is that the training has been implicit, or, if explicit, I assumed the students would transfer the skills to another task after one practice activity. During the seminar, we learned that in order for students to reach a level of independence in language learning, we need to use a more strategic way to teach strategies. Such a strategy may include (1) raising students' awareness of the use of different strategies, (2) training them to use specific strategies, (3) giving them opportunities to practice new strategies, and (4) giving them new activities to which they can transfer these strategies. ~ Kate Brooke-Beyer, Middle School Spanish Teacher

No doubt you have seen in your own classrooms that students have different kinds of strategies they use to learn a new language. Research has proven that students benefit from learning about their language-learning strategies. (More on the classification of such strategies can be found on p. 37.) Motivation, too, has been shown to have a profound impact on the successes and failures of students to learn languages. (A look at the nature of motivation and its influence on language learning can be found in the next part of this section on p. 34.)

Learning-style preference

Researchers both in educational psychology and second language learning have observed that learners have similarities and differences in their preferred ways of approaching learning. The natural predisposition that learners might have to approach a learning task in one way rather than another has been referred to as their *learning-style preference*. For example, some learners are oriented to learning more through sight than through sound or more globally than through focusing on particulars. In general these style preferences are relatively stable. So, while you may not have much control over how your students learn, you *can* modify the learning tasks you use in your classes in a way that may bring the best out of particular learners with particular learning-style preferences. It is also possible

that learners over time can be encouraged to stretch their styles by incorporating approaches to learning they resisted in the past. For example, a student may have been so global in her approach to reading academic texts that she missed specific details that could have assisted her in deriving meaning. With proper encouragement from her language instructor, she can become more versed at maintaining her global perspective, while paying more attention to particulars as well.

As learners become more aware of their learning-style preferences and the kinds of language strategies available to them, they may be motivated to expand their repertoire of language strategies. And even if their preferences for specific strategies do not change, the learners may gain new insights into how, when, and why to use those same strategies. They will have learned how to control the language-learning process.

Research shows that taking the time and effort for strategies-based instruction is worth it. A study by Cohen, Weaver, and Li (1996) found that strategies-based instruction made a difference in performance on the experimental speaking task and also demonstrated a direct link between the frequency of use of a given strategy and performance on the speaking task for which that strategy was chosen. The study also confirmed that students themselves should be the ones who finalize their own strategy checklists and that they need to make their own choices as to the strategies they will use in different situations.

Students who received strategies-based instruction gained valuable insights about the performance of language tasks, the target language, and their language learning. The following are some examples taken from the report of this study:

- With regard to learning from the task: "I was able to read and understand from context words that I didn't know."
- With regard to learning about language: "It can be more descriptive than English. Norwegian is more precise."
- With regard to learning about their language learning: "I learned I need to relax myself a little more to be able to do the tasks easier with more comprehension."
- With regard to becoming a more independent learner: "I learned how to learn to speak."

> ### Teacher Tip
> Use this activity with your students to help them identify ways that they are "good language learners" and discover ways to become even better language learners.
>
> ☀ Classroom Activity
> *The Good Language Learner* (p. ACT-9)
> (📑 p. DM-21)

The original goal of finding the "good language learner" has now come full circle. As language instructors we are still focusing on ways to help less-successful learners, whatever the definition of "success" may be. As we help these students learn how to succeed with languages, we are at the same time giving them the tools to become better learners. Since the ultimate goal of styles- and strategies-based instruction is to help all language learners become good language learners, Rubin and her colleagues were right on target. The good language learner does indeed exist—in our own strategies-based classrooms.

> *Our role as language and culture instructors is not only to teach our learners language and culture but to teach them HOW TO approach these learning tasks. In this respect the learning-strategies information in this guide will prove very useful for instructors who want to help their students become more independent and empowered learners. ~ Patricia Mougel, Director of Language Instruction, Department of French and Italian, University of Minnesota*