

THE GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNER: EXPLORING APTITUDE, MOTIVATION, AND STRATEGIES OF SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS

Kristina Beckman

Introduction

In the field of language acquisition, there has been a great deal of focus on problems and obstacles faced by learners of a second language. Issues of age, cognitive development, and social factors as inhibitors to successful learning have been debated at great length. Instead of discussing the multitude of reasons why a person *cannot* learn a language, this paper examines traits of good language learners and what characteristics they may have in common. The three areas of focus will be individual aptitude, motivation, and learner strategies. This topic is of direct concern to those in the language field since aptitude, motivation, and strategies can potentially be manipulated to assist the learners in the classroom environment. First, the issues of whether general predictions about aptitude are appropriate, accurate, or worthwhile will be discussed. A standard test, the MLAT, used for several decades has both supporters who maintain that the test accurately predicts learner success and critics who believe the test is too narrowly focused and does not look at the individual as a whole person.

Second, two types of motivation, integrative and instrumental, will be defined and compared to give a better understanding for the reasons behind why students choose to learn a second language.

Last, learner strategies will be examined. While most support teaching learning strategies in the classroom from a conceptual standpoint, others argue that we lack empirical evidence and should wait for concrete evidence before teaching any strategies. In addition, there is a mixture of successful students who do not use strategies while unsuccessful students find little or new improvement despite using learning strategies. Those who are still hesitant about the benefits want to account for these peripheral groups before making blanket statements about the success of teaching strategies in the classroom.

Aptitude

Learner aptitude is difficult to locate and identify because, if this aptitude indeed exists, it is not in a tangible form that readily permits identification. Therefore, researchers must turn to predictors of success and form correlations between aptitude testing and successful language learning. An additional problem

exists with the testing procedures themselves in that the laboratory setting of the examination setting does not reflect a natural environment where language will be used nor does it look at the learner as a whole person. Furthermore, it is difficult to separate the influence of existing linguistic difficulties a learner may struggle with in his or her first language. These L1 problems can potentially transfer to a second language learning situation and affect the learner's experience during the learning process.

When discussing the role of aptitude in learning, Carroll and Sapon's (1959) Modern Languages Aptitude Test (MLAT) is still discussed after nearly four decades as a natural starting point as is Pimsleur's (1966) thirty year-old research, The Language Aptitude Battery (LAB).

Carroll (1981) designed his studies on aptitude to, "support the ideas that foreign language aptitude exists, in the sense that people differ widely in their capacity to learn foreign languages easily and rapidly, and that this aptitude can be measured in such a way as to make predictions of success useful and reasonably accurate. It is of interest, however, to inquire into the nature of foreign language aptitude. One may ask whether it is a 'general,' unitary ability (albeit somewhat independent of 'intelligence'), or a composite or collection of a number of independent, specialized abilities, and it is then urgent to try to characterize in some meaningful and principled way whatever ability or abilities are disclosed by this analysis." (p. 98). To arrange the results in a meaningful way, Carroll created a four-point methodology to account for aptitude measured by the MLAT, "1) Phonemic coding ability: an ability to identify distinct sounds, to form associations between those sounds and symbols representing them, and to retain these associations, 2) Grammatical sensitivity: the ability to recognize the grammatical functions of words (or other linguistic entities) in sentence structures, 3) Rote learning ability for foreign language materials: the ability to learn associations between sounds and meanings rapidly and efficiently, and to retain these associations, and; 4) Inductive language learning ability: the ability to infer or induce the rules governing a set of language materials, given samples of language materials that permit such inferences." (p. 105).

The MLAT has received mixed reviews over the past few decades. It has been criticized (Skehan, 1989; Oxford, 1993) as not being able to account for those with very low level learning aptitudes, narrowly focused to reflect classroom learning rather than natural language encounters outside the isolated constraints of a classroom, non-inclusive of a variety of learning styles, and limited to native speakers of English. Others, however, found support for using the MLAT when looking at achievement over a two year period (Sparks, Ganschow, & Patton, 1995; Sparks, Ganschow, Patton, Artzer, et al., 1997; Sparks & Ganschow, 2001), found a strong correlation between MLAT scores and classification as a good or poor learner (Ganschow, Sparks, Javorsky, Pohlman, & Bishop-Marbury, 1991; Ganschow et al., 1994), and government agencies believed the test to be very strong in predicting success in language learning (Ehrman, 1998; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995).

Based on his what he views as limitations in the MLAT, Skehan (1991) proposed shifting the scope from generalizations about learners as a whole to the individual. He states that, "there is a talent for learning languages that is independent of intelligence, the talent is not simply the result of previous learning experiences, is relatively stable, and varies between people." (p. 276) In light of this, Skehan proposed that aptitude is one factor which influences strategies and styles, and, therefore, effects the speaker's output. In addition, he believes that much research (Pimsleur, Sundland & McIntyre, 1966; Petersen and Al-Halik, 1976; Wells, 1986) has narrowly focused on unrelated components of language learning rather than examining profiles of language learners which could incorporate simultaneous routes to language learning. By broadening the scope of examination to a "user's model" rather than an "analyst's model", Skehan hopes that learners will be classified by more general categories, such as linguistic-oriented or memory-dependent, and instruction and materials can then be geared toward these areas. This is a

marked shift from pigeonholing learners into narrow slots, which on some level suggest reasons why the students may *not* be able to achieve proficiency, to viewing learners as having differing strengths.

The implications for future research are an invitation to researchers to explore how to match up the learner strengths to instructional reality. Skehan hopes to see three areas of aptitude research expand: more academic fields conducting research, the definition of aptitude broadened to include varied competencies, and the location where research is conducted. First, Skehan invites more fields in academia to become involved in the aptitude studies so that research in cognitive psychology, memory, and speech perception may shed additional light on the role of aptitude in second language learning. He also proposes that the definition of aptitude expand to include many types of competences, such as social competence, illocutionary competence, and strategic competence. Last, Skehan believes that aptitude research should depart from the standard laboratory of the formal classroom and expand to settings that are more informal where learning takes place.

Sparks and Ganschow (1991) shift the aptitude focus from L2 acquisition successes or difficulties to L1 reading abilities. They proposed in the Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis (LCDH) that the degree to which a reader has command of phonological, syntactic, and semantic elements of language will strongly correlate to their success in learning a second language. "A deficiency in one or more of the components is likely to affect the student's ability to learn a FL. In addition, verbal memory differences may account for the quality and speed by which a person gains access to the codes. In short, inefficiency of the language processing codes may produce interference resulting in individual differences in FL acquisition. In our view, low motivation, poor attitude, or high levels of anxiety are, most likely, a manifestation of deficiencies in the efficient control of one's native language, though they are obviously correlated with difficulty in FL learning. We suggest, then, that native *language* factors are likely to be implicated as the main variable on FL learning. We suggest further that the phonological and syntactic components may pose the most difficulty for students with linguistic coding deficits in FL courses." (p. 10) It may be unreasonable to expect students to master a second language if they do not already possess the necessary skills in their first language. This research suggests that aptitude testing may be skewed by L1 skills rather than L2 aptitude.

Motivation

Since every child is able to learn a language, some researchers did not feel that aptitude was a relevant issue in determining one's ability to communicate in another language. In some countries, such as Switzerland, it is expected that two or three languages will be mastered and used on a daily basis. The question of aptitude is never an issue in these environments.

To investigate possible alternative reasons for successful language learning which is not attributed to aptitude, Gardner and Lambert (1972) turned to motivation as a possible factor in language learning. They categorized motivation by two forms: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation is the desire to learn more about another language along with its people and culture. Instrumental motivation is driven by the need to fulfill a practical need. Document translation or job advancement are examples of instrumental motivations. Gardner and Lambert describe the two factors as, "The notion of an integrative motive implies that success in mastering a second language depends on a particular orientation on the part of the learner, reflecting a willingness or a desire to be like representative members of the 'other' language community. Hence, the acquisition of a new language involves much more than mere acquisition of a new set of verbal habits. The language student must be willing to adopt appropriate features of behavior

which characterize members of another linguistic community...The contrasting form of orientation we did give attention to is referred to as an instrumental orientation toward the language-learning task, one characterized by a desire to gain social recognition or economic advantages through knowledge of a foreign language. The perspective is more self-oriented in the sense that a person prepares to learn a new code in order to derive benefits of a noninterpersonal sort." (p.14)

The researchers conducted a twelve-year investigation of high school aged students who studied French. This study was conducted in Canada, the United States, and the Philippines. Louisiana and Maine were selected as states whose residents keep the French language and culture alive. The Connecticut students, on the other hand, have the European French people as their reference group. The last group of students lives in Manila, Philippines and receive their educational instruction in French but speak Tagalog in the home.

All students were given a questionnaire to determine how strong their motivations were to learn French. This test was then compared to their academic grades to see if a relationship existed. The test was designed to identify their motivation intensity, reasons for studying the language, perceptions of French-Americans, parental encouragement, and preference of English or French.

The data in all the studies indicated a strong relationship between motivation and good grades; however, each region appeared to have a tendency toward specific motivation factors. The students from Louisiana felt encouraged by their parents' support and their own sense of satisfaction. The students in Maine found inspiration from their teacher's enthusiasm and desired to please their teacher. In Connecticut, their instrumental motivation was viewing French as being useful to them.

Lukmani (1972) delved further to explore the effect of instrumental motivators and hypothesized that they would be of greater influence than integrative factors. This was contrasted with the findings of Lambert (1959), Anisfeld and Lambert (1961), and Spolsky (1969). Lukmani felt the two motivators needed to be examined separately in order to better identify the students' specific needs and reasons for learning a second language.

The study explored whether a correlation would exist between the nature of the student's motivations for learning English and proficiency scores. The subjects were sixty native speakers of Marathi of high school age who had studied English for approximately seven years. They were of non-westernized, average to lower-class families.

The tests used for analysis were an indirect questionnaire, a cloze test, and a direct questionnaire. The indirect questionnaire listed seventeen desirable traits. Lukmani selected the traits for, "their relevance to the subjects" in determining what they considered to be a desirable reference group image and for assessing their level of self-satisfaction. For the cloze test, a passage judged to be of a suitable level of English and also interesting enough to encourage Ss to complete the task, was selected and every 6th word left blank. This was taken to be the global test of English proficiency...The direct questionnaire consisted of five instrumental and five integrative reasons for learning English and Ss had to check one of five possible reactions to the reasons, ranging from 'Very important to me' to 'Absolutely not important for me'. The reasons were selected for their relevance and applicability to the Ss and the two kinds of reasons were randomly ordered on the page...this order of presentation was chosen in order to get

responses to traits (on the indirect questionnaire) unbiased by reasons for learning English (on the direct questionnaire)." (p. 263-4)

The data showed that the Marathi-speaking high school students were motivated by instrumental reasons rather than integrative reasons. The reasons given in order of importance were: 1) getting a good job, 2) coping with university classes, 3) traveling abroad, 4) acquiring new ideas and broadening their outlook, 5) becoming more modern, 6) reading advanced technical literature, 7) getting access to international books, journals, etc., 8) acquaintance with people in touch with the latest trends in thought and behavior in the west, 9) becoming friendly with English-speaking Indians, and 10) thinking and behaving like English-speaking Indians. (p. 271)

The top three reasons were instrumental in nature as were the sixth and seventh. The subjects' reasons for listing getting a good job and coping with university classes were that they were of immediate concern to them. Reading advanced technical literature and getting access to international publications ranked in the middle. Lukmani suggests that they will become of greater importance as the students progress in their professional careers.

In addition to analyzing the answers provided by the subjects, the study also found a correlation between the cloze test scores for proficiency and instrumental motivation ($p < .001$). The same was not true for integrative motivations.

Another aspect of Gardner and Lambert's research addresses how the learner's perceptions of members of the target language affects their motivation to learn the new language. Hermann (1978) disagreed with Gardner and Lambert's position that the lesser the degree of the learner's ethnocentrism, the greater their proficiency in the target language. If one followed Gardner and Lambert's view, one would expect to see consistent trends between attitudes and performance. In order to test her Motivational versus the Resultative Hypothesis that success in a target language may be a motivating factor in how a learner perceives the target group. Hermann compared German students who were had studied for five years with those just beginning to learn English.

The findings did reflect a longitudinal relationship between proficiency and attitude. Students who had ranked in the top third of their group and had studied English for several years held more favorable opinions of English people. Additionally, lower proficiency students had more prejudicial concepts about English people. The author perceives this inconsistency to be attributed to learner successes or difficulties that are projected onto their perceptions about English people. "It seems to be the learner's linguistic failure which accounts for his unfavorable response to the particular ethnographic community. Thus, it appears justified to assume that doing poorly in a second language course first elicits an aversion to this subject which is then gradually transferred to the speakers of the target language. Such an explanation would also account for findings reported in several studies which indicate that low achievement in a foreign language coincides with prejudice or hostile attitudes regarding the speakers of that language." (p. 253)

Spolsky (1969) also explored how integrative factors affect learning when students must choose between their native language or speakers of a second language as their reference group. The study consisted of 315 subjects representing over 80 countries who were studying at American universities. The researchers gave the participants a direct questionnaire in which they listed reasons for studying in the United States and an indirect questionnaire which listed thirty adjectives. The subjects were asked to identify how well the adjectives described themselves, suited an image of how they would like to be, matched other speakers of their native language, and described native English speakers.

Spolsky's findings suggested a correlation between the degree to which a learner associates themselves with the target language group and their English proficiency scores. This preference to associate with the target group rather than one's own native group suggests that the integrative motivations are again present in successful language learning.

Following Spolsky's assumption that integrative motivations affect language learning, Strong (1984) researched whether the integrative motivation was the cause or the result of being a successful learner, but found contrary evidence to Spolsky's. Strong studied the pattern of friendships within a group of monolingual and bilingual kindergarten students. He proposed "...of the beginning group, those who showed signs of an integrative orientation to members of the target culture would develop communicative skills in English faster than those who showed no evidence of integrative motivation." (p. 5). The students' nomination of playmates and friends would suggest the degree to which they were demonstrating allegiances to the target group. Their structural knowledge, vocabulary, and pronunciation were tested at both the beginning and end of the school year. Spolsky found no discernible tendency for more advanced students to prefer members of the target group as playmates or friends.

Learner Strategies

Learning strategies show promising in identifying and forming Good Language Learners. The strategies used are so varied that they appeal to timid or gregarious personalities, and focused on creative learning styles. Strategies can be actively taught in the classroom and each individual student may then select the strategy or strategies best suited for them. They will become empowered as learners and may also be able to transfer these strategies to other subject areas. This discussion will list seven learning strategies, but this serves as only a starting point for future researchers to examine and expand upon these existing strategies.

Rubin (1975) videotaped classroom activity in order to observe behaviors of successful language learners. Seven general strategies were identified, thus resulting in a description of a good language learner as, "1) a willing and accurate guesser, 2) has a strong drive to communicate, 3) is not often inhibited, 4) is prepared to attend to form, 5) practices, 6) monitors his own speech and the speech of others, and 7) attends to meaning." (p. 45-7).

Rubin's seven strategies can be classified as either unimpeded or self-directed. Willingness to guess, a desire to communicate, and an uninhibited style are strategies which suggest an open and free approach to language learning. By readily absorbing all available information, such as context or the tone of a conversation, and making inferences about meaning, a speaker may gather clues from communicative contact without requiring concrete certainty. This enables the learner to understand context without being dependent on their present level of ability. Flexibility and creativity in the method of communication

assists the speaker communicate his idea. S/he may mime, use alternative phrasing, or spell out what s/he cannot pronounce correctly. An uninhibited nature allows the speaker to go beyond his present confines and freely communicate. Using these strategies gives the speaker more opportunities to successfully communicate his ideas.

Alternatively, there is value in methodical, conscious strategies. Actively noticing form, repetition, monitoring speech patterns, and observing communication from many angles are four strategies utilized by successful language learners. Attention is paid to patterns, classifications, and relevant clues by these learners. They make concerted efforts to practice with great frequency and are consciously absorbing clues during the communication process.

Reiss (1985) countered that Rubin's proposed strategy of being uninhibited is a personality trait rather than a strategy. She states, "This 'strategy' is really a combination of two personality variables; introversion/extroversion and low/high tolerance of ambiguity." (p. 513) In addition to testing this hypothesis, Reiss added the use of mnemonics to the list. In all, nine features were examined; six of Rubin's strategies (the characteristic of uninhibited behavior was replaced with Reiss' personality trait), introversion/extroversion, low/high tolerance of ambiguity, and use of mnemonics.

Reiss gave a questionnaire composed of twenty-seven items asking the students to reply honestly about how they would approach each learning situation. Of the ninety-eight participants, thirty-eight had been identified as good language learners. In addition to selecting their approaches, the students were also asked to rate themselves as students (superior, above average, average, or below average), describe themselves (assertive/ timid and impulsive/deliberate).

The results confirmed that the good language learners were utilizing the strategies proposed by Rubin. They participated verbally or silently at all times, mentally corrected their errors, and methodically approached new material.

Two of Reiss' three proposed additions to Rubin's list proved to be of little use to the learners. The use of mnemonic devices was not found among the strategies used by successful language learners nor were definitive patterns found when exploring the individual personality characteristics of impulsive/deliberate. However, Reiss discovered that the personality variable did not account for successful learning, therefore, she disagreed with the notion that a successful learner is uninhibited.

Oxford (1990) believes that numerous strategies can be explicitly taught and that the student should receive instruction in how to apply the strategies to various learning situations. The three classifications are memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies. These primary strategies are then applied to the four language skills; listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Further, some strategies are noted as applicable to all language skills.

Memory games, or mnemonics, are used to create associations between previously unrelated items. The memory devices are, "create mental images, apply images and sounds, review well, and employ actions"

(p. 38). In each of these, the learner's task is to create meaning so that the material will be better retained. Some of these memory strategies are grouping, associating/elaborating, and placing new words in context.

Grouping strategies are best utilized when listening and reading. When a learner hears new vocabulary, they should mentally sort the unfamiliar words into general categories, such as adjectives, colors, family, or verbs of motion. When reading, the student may actively read the material and consciously look for patterns or opposites in the literature.

Associating or Elaborating are also applicable techniques for listening and reading. These include unusual and unique associations between the new material and a mental image to accompany it. It was suggested to use a ridiculous image in order to remember associations.

The cognitive strategies are practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output. Oxford believes that practicing is an essential strategy which is frequently overlooked or under-rated. Practicing is easily applied to all four language skills. She suggests honing the skill of practicing by "repeating, formally practicing with sounds and writing systems, recognizing and using formulas and patterns, recombining, and practicing naturalistically." (p. 45)

Oxford classifies compensation strategies as guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. Guessing is an active process in which the learner uses linguistic and other clues to interpret meaning when encountering unfamiliar material. Since the learner is in a receptive state when encountering new information, this is a sound strategy to employ when listening and reading. Oxford writes, "Good language learners, when confronted with unknown expressions, make educated guesses. On the other hand, less adept language learners often panic, tune out, or grab the dog-eared dictionary and try to look up every unfamiliar word - harmful responses which impede progress toward proficiency." (p. 47)

To use the second of the compensation strategies, overcoming limitations, Oxford suggests switching to the mother tongue (code switching), asking for help, miming or gesturing, avoiding difficult situations until better prepared to operate in that environment, steering the conversation to a familiar topic, selecting words with similar but not exact in meaning when unsure of the correct selection, attempting to create new vocabulary words, and using a synonym. These strategies can be used by learners of all proficiency levels and in numerous circumstances. Since the learner is trying to communicate their ideas, the strategies for overcoming limitations are used when speaking and writing. These strategies offer the learner a kind of freedom to know they can function in a variety of settings.

Wenden and Rubin(1987) demonstrated the importance of the conscious attention paid to strategies by learners. Students were asked to identify whether they used learning strategies, and, if so, what those strategies were. Wenden taped conversations with 25 advanced adult learners of English about their processes. From these answers, she extracted twelve recurring statements which were then categorized in three subgroups: 1) Use the language, 2) Learn about the language, and 3) Personal factors are important.

The statements made about use the language reflected the students' beliefs that they must approach language learning as an active participant. They felt they needed to use language in a natural way, seek every opportunity to practice, think in the second language, spend time where the target language is spoken, and not worry about making errors.

Other statements about learning the language suggested that using analytical skills was important. Some strategies listed were learning grammar and vocabulary, studying in a formal classroom, making mental notes about their mistakes, and remaining conscious of language in all contexts.

In addition to the social and cognitive approaches listed by the students, personal factors were also mentioned. The emotional aspect of enthusiasm, fear, or embarrassment played a role in either facilitating or inhibiting learning. Self-concept and aptitude were also listed. One student mentioned she had been treated as a child because of her limited spoken language abilities and needed to keep her own self-concept in the forefront of her mind in order to avoid regressing or doubting herself.

Of all the strategies listed, practice and learning grammar and vocabulary were listed most frequently. Wenden's study reinforces the concept that strategies are already being used by students. This suggests that since students are seeking ways to enhance learning, they would welcome formal instruction in this area.

Not all those in the field of second language acquisition are in favor of actively teaching learner strategies. Rees-Miller (1993) reserves judgment on the successful implementation of teaching learner strategies until empirical evidence is documented. Rees-Miller wants support for the assumption that learners even benefit from understanding their own styles or receiving training to implement new strategies. She offers contrary evidence that unsuccessful learners also employ strategies (Vann & Abraham 1990), successful learners use strategies which are not recommended (Naiman 1978), and that training did not necessarily lead to improved language proficiency. (O'Malley, 1985; Wenden, 1987)

In addition to remaining suspect on the underlying assumptions of teaching strategies, Rees-Miller lists several reasons why actively introducing strategies has proven unsuccessful in the past. She attributes the lack of success to the following: a stigma felt by older learners when taught learning techniques as adults (Oxford, 1990; Bruton 1984), resistance to adopting strategies other than their existing ones (Porte 1988), a general lack of motivation toward both language learning and strategy instruction by some students (Naiman 1978), and a stylistic or theoretical difference between teacher and student (Horwitz 1987).

To determine the value of spending class time in strategy instruction, Rees-Miller maintains that, first, empirical evidence must be given to substantiate the underlying claims that teaching acquisition strategies may be advantageous to students, and secondly, that if these advantages are proven, the question of actual incorporation into the classroom curriculum needs to be addressed. She proposed that a longitudinal study must be undertaken in order to evaluate the effectiveness of these practices.

Conclusion

Having knowledge in the areas of aptitude, motivation, and strategies potentially provides the teacher with additional ways to assist their students. However, from a practical standpoint, I conclude that learner strategies are by far the most valuable to the teacher. It is unlikely that aptitude testing can efficiently and easily be incorporated into a curriculum. If aptitude classification testing were a consideration, students would subsequently be placed in different classrooms. This could potentially be disheartening and

embarrassing for students placed in the lower-level groups. They would feel stigmatized and dislike the study of language before they even started their studies.

While students may feel motivated for different reasons, these factors can easily change over the course of their time spent learning language. As long as a teacher incorporates activities that appeal to a wide variety of possible motivating factors, the needs of the students will be met. Realistically, there are three groups rather than two in the motivational category; those who feel an affinity for native speakers, others who are motivated by external factors, and the students who are not motivated at all. By teaching in a dynamic fashion and remaining focused on actually imparting knowledge to the students, one hopes that most students will respond in a positive manner.

Teaching learning strategies in the classroom is a practical and feasible way to help students improve their language skills. These skills are tools that can be actively taught in the classroom and may also be used in other learning situations. Rubin's strategies can be taught to a varied student body. Strategies such as being a willing and accurate guesser, not being inhibited, and having a strong drive to communicate are easily adopted by outgoing students. Alternative strategies such as attending to form, practicing, monitoring, and noticing forms can be used by students with an introverted nature.

The importance of discussing aptitude, motivation, and strategies is that they focus on the ways in which second language learners are successful. Even proponents of the existence of aptitude who suggest that a bias exists from the onset may concede that the scope of aptitude may alter when examined outside of a laboratory environment. This opens up the possibility that each individual may possess a unique kind of linguistic aptitude. Since motivation is partially under the control of the learner, this suggests that motivation can be enhanced and used to the student's advantage. Further research of strategies can expand on the number and types of strategies presently used. Research could focus on two avenues; teaching strategies already in existence such as those offered by Rubin, and, asking learners to explore their own styles and strategies to discover new, currently unidentified strategies.

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