

C. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNER

A number of researchers have drawn up lists of the characteristics of good language learners. I have referred to some of these in filling out the following list produced by Wenden(*1).

1. Good language learners find a style of learning that suits them.

They are self aware ie they know themselves.. When they are in a learning situation which they do not like, they are able to adapt it to their personal needs. They believe they can always learn something, whatever the situation. They also know how they prefer to learn and choose learning situations that are suited to their way of learning.

2. Good language learners are actively involved in the language learning process.

They **take responsibility** for their own learning. Besides regular language classes, they create opportunities to use the language. They know practice is very important. They are willing to take risks, to appear foolish if necessary.

3. Good language learners try to figure out how the language works.

They try to come to grips with the language as a system. They pay attention to form and look for patterns. They develop good techniques for improving their pronunciation, learning grammar and vocabulary. They welcome mistakes as a way of learning more about the language.

4. Good language learners know that language is used to communicate.

They pay attention to meaning. They have good techniques to practise listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the early stages of their language learning they do not worry about making mistakes. They speak and try to become fluent. They look for opportunities to speak with native speakers.

5. Good language learners are like good detectives.

They are always looking for clues that will help them understand how the language works. They make guesses and ask people to correct them if they are wrong. They compare what they say with what others say. They keep a record of what they have learned and think about it. ie they monitor themselves.

6. Good language learners learn to think in the language.

7. Good language learners realize that language learning is not easy.

They try to overcome their feelings of frustration and their lack of confidence. They are able to come to terms with the affective demands of language learning, ie they can manage their emotions. They are realistic in their setting of study goals.

8. Good language learners are also good culture learners aware of the very close relationship between language and culture.
9. Good language learners have a long term commitment to language learning. They are realistic in realising that it takes time and practice.

Personal application

Obviously the question we now want to ask ourselves is 'How do I match up as a language learner to this list of characteristics?'

1. Questionnaire for a good language learner (*2)

Below is a very simple questionnaire to help you think about what you do as a learner. Circle the answer that describes how you approach language learning.

A: always O: often S: sometimes R: rarely N: never

The good language learner finds a style of learning that suits him/her

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I try to get something out of every learning situation even if I don't like it. | A | O | S | R | N |
| 2. I choose learning situations that are suited to my way of learning. | A | O | S | R | N |

Good language learners are actively involved in the language learning process

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3. Besides language class, I plan activities that give me a chance to use and learn the language. | A | O | S | R | N |
| 4. I choose activities because I am already familiar with the ideas. | A | O | S | R | N |
| 5. I can figure out my special problems. | A | O | S | R | N |
| 6. I try to do something about my special problems. | A | O | S | R | N |
| 7. I do things I don't usually do to gain more information about my foreign language. | A | O | S | R | N |

Good language learners try to figure out how the language works.

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. I pay special attention to pronunciation. | A | O | S | R | N |
| 9. I pay special attention to grammar. | A | O | S | R | N |
| 10. I pay special attention to vocabulary. | A | O | S | R | N |

Good language learners know that language is used to communicate

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11. I try to develop good techniques to practise listening, speaking, reading and writing. | A | O | S | R | N |
| 12. I try to develop good techniques to improve my pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. | A | O | S | R | N |

Good language learners are like good detectives

13. I am like a detective. I look for clues that will help me understand how language works.	A	O	S	R	N
14. When I don't know, I guess.	A	O	S	R	N
15. I ask people to correct me if I make a mistake.	A	O	S	R	N
16. I compare what I say with what others say to see if I'm using correct language.	A	O	S	R	N
17. I think about what I've learned.	A	O	S	R	N

Good language learners learn to think in the language

18. I try to think in my target language.	A	O	S	R	N
---	---	---	---	---	---

Good language learners try to overcome their feelings of frustration and lack of confidence

19. I overcome my feelings of frustration and lack of confidence.	A	O	S	R	N
20. I can laugh at my mistakes.	A	O	S	R	N

2. Another way of deciding whether you have the characteristics of a good language learner is by using the list of adjectives below. (*3)

- **self aware**
- **inquisitive**
- **tolerant**
- **self critical**
- **realistic**
- **willing to experiment**
- **actively involved**
- **organised**

Having done the questionnaire and compared yourself with this list you may well find yourself feeling depressed or overwhelmed by what may seem an unattainable ideal. These lists of characteristics exist to give us insights into what possibly makes for good language learning. They are not to be taken as gospel truth. They are to be a guideline and a stimulus to our thinking rather than a prescription 'this is how you as a language learner must be.' Stevick has written a very interesting book entitled 'Success with foreign languages - seven who achieved it and what worked for them'. He writes, 'When I began the interviews, I was hoping to find out what the successful language learners did alike. If we could teach their secrets to our students, I thought then every one else would become as successful as the people I had talked with. It soon became apparent, however, that learners are even more different from one another than I had expected. Success with foreign languages, I found, does not come by one simple formula.' (*3) Stevick's findings can, I believe, be a real encouragement to us. There is no one right method to teach or learn a language. What matters is rather that we gather insights and ideas regarding what works best for each of us personally as individuals.

Notes (for section C)

1. Wenden, A. 'Helping language learners think about learning' in Currents of change in English Language Teaching ed. by Rossner and Bolitho OUP 1990 p174.
2. From Wenden, A. 'Learner strategies for Learner Autonomy' p. 123
3. This list of adjectives comes from Ellis and Sinclair Learning to learn English Teacher's book p6-7 CUP 1989
4. Stevick, E. Success with foreign language Prentice Hall 1989 Preface p. X1
The following extract from the summary of Stevick's book(p138) gives some idea of just how different his learners were in their approach.

'The learners we have met in this book often differ markedly with regard to what they consider to be 'natural', and what they prefer to do or not to do. They differ also with regard to the kinds of data they seem to hold onto best. Ann depends on her ear and is quite content to repeat things before she sees them in writing; Frieda would probably have failed Hebrew if she had not found a way to see the printed lessons ahead of time. Ed, Eugene and some of the others want to understand the structure of things before they practice them; Carla is ready to practice immediately, but has trouble with the requirement to deal with grammar. Gwen dislikes drills and Carla was defeated by them, but Bert, Derek, Ed and Frieda place high value on this kind of relatively mechanical activity. Ann is excellent at mimicry, while Bert didn't even try it. Ann simply cannot learn words out of context; Bob, Bert and Dexter are good at it. And so on. Hardly a clear model for an aspiring language student who wants to profit from their example!