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What is the Essence of a Good Learner?

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Abstract

This paper seeks to connect teachers with their students through a description and analysis of their essential and shared behaviours. These essential characteristics are described in their relationship to the Japanese education system. Going beyond this context the author asserts that teaching and learning are fundamentally the same set of skills regardless of culture or era. A teacher is simply an advanced student and therefore to know one is to know the other.

Key words : learning strategies, growth mindset, error correction, ambiguity.

What made you pick up this article? Is it out of general interest as a reader or is it perhaps out of a sense that we teachers share a fundamental connection with our students? In this paper I will re-examine the ground-breaking work of Joan Rubin in her seminal article What the "Good Language Learner" can teach us (1975). Although language learning strategies have been classified by scholars since Rubin (O'Malley et al 85, Oxford 90, Stern 92 and Ellis 94) most of these attempts to identify learning strategies do not contain any radical changes to her original work and all share the same core skills. It is my intention to explore three of Rubin's good learner strategies and describe how I have found them to interact with the Japanese education system, the Japanese learner of English and why they are important to us as teachers. Furthermore, although this paper explores language learning strategies in the classroom, I aim to write broadly enough to understand and apply these strategies to any sphere of learning. It is my belief that the strategies in this paper hold universal value. They can be applied by people who want to become better learners of any topic at any time and in

any place.

Rubin defined learning strategies as "any set of operations, steps, plans, or routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information." (1987) Starting her study in the mid 70's Rubin interviewed and intensely observed language learners to unearth what good students do to learn a foreign language. Her ultimate goal was to make these strategies available to less successful learners. According to Rubin all successful students of language apply some or all of the following principles:

1. Be a good guesser
2. Be willing to appear foolish
3. Have a high tolerance for ambiguity

Let's look in depth at each of these key points.

1. Be a Good Guesser

In order to be a good guesser, a student must gather and store material in an efficient manner. He also has to take in all the hints available and narrow down the options to a final answer. Because many Japanese students have been exposed to few learning techniques beyond rote memorization, being a good guesser does not necessarily come easily to them. Having 12 years teaching experience at universities and high schools in Nagoya I find my views accord with Matsumoto (2002) in his book *The New Japan*.

"The Japanese education system needs to reexamine its overemphasis on rote memorization. In my experience the typical Japanese student excels at learning facts and figures. What so many students lack is the ability to think about problems creatively, curiously and autonomously." p.188

Rote memorization means that instead of learning through a process of exploratory trial and error the teacher simply gives all the answers on a topic and students are expected to repeat these large chunks of information until they are memorized. Sheer repetition is one way to cram knowledge into a student. However, it is done at the expense of understanding the meaning of the information and applying more interesting and motivating ways of memorization. The critics of rote learning emphasize the importance of deep learning over the mere recall of facts which is seen as less important because one cannot necessarily grasp the meaning of facts nor transfer the knowledge they represent to another area. Memorizing vocabulary for example is pointless without understanding how to use the lexicon in conversation or text. A detailed example comes from the *Daily Yomiuri* (10/10/99) describing

how students' robotic responses can be correct on paper but not in reality. A test question for 13 year olds asked: "An army bus holds 36 soldiers. If 1128 soldiers are being bused to their training site how many buses are needed?" If you divide 1128 by 36 you get 31 with a remainder of 12 meaning it would take 32 buses to transport the soldiers. Most students did the division correctly but less than one in four students got the answer correct. The most common answer from the students was 31 remainder12.

This emphasis on rote memorization without awareness and individual judgement is a symptom of an education system which overburdens students with facts to memorize. Rote learning focuses on a speedy way to store large quantities of facts rather than encouraging the art of taking all the hints available, analyzing the information and the student coming to an autonomous and logical conclusion.

I would however offer one caveat to this criticism of rote memorization since western teachers in Japan sometimes attack this method of learning without considering any of its positive attributes. First, let me say that I grew up in England using rote memorization among other things to learn the alphabet and my times tables. Rote learning can be a mental exercise that encourages us to be systematic and patient and I believe that myself and others use this system more than we acknowledge. Rote memorization can instill confidence in students by enabling them to grasp the fundamentals of a topic. Although my personal teaching philosophy holds that we should encourage students to be individual thinkers, this creative thought process does not occur in a vacuum. Rote memorization can be considered as one way to learn the basics of a subject. The problem occurs when teachers overuse this method and study becomes predictable and boring. Teachers need to go beyond repeating chunks of information to creating a learning experience that arouses and sustains curiosity, where students draw conclusions, connect similarities and organize their own thoughts into a coherent argument.

2. Be Willing to Appear Foolish

"Our knowledge comes from our experiences and our experiences come from our foolishness." Thai Buddhist Proverb

One definition of someone who is willing to appear foolish is someone who can make mistakes in front of others. Each of us has an ego, a sense of self, and so we may feel ashamed to stand out as a person who makes errors or displays ignorance. Unlike adults,

young children often do not have this negative reaction to mistakes probably because their ego has not yet been fully formed. Young children are also known for being fast and voracious learners whose learning looks like a game. Taking our cue from the child's mind it should be remembered that errors will always happen when one genuinely engages with the learning process. Mistakes are a part of the nature of learning.

Selinker (1972) in her research on errors in second language acquisition uses the term interlanguage to describe a structured system which learners construct and which comes closer and closer to the target language as they continue studying. There is inherently a hypothesis-testing strategy cultivated as the student progresses in his learning. From this perspective errors are seen as the rungs of a ladder as one moves upwards in the level of proficiency. Errors come to be viewed as acceptable and even important for growth to occur. It is perhaps for this very reason that the ancient Ninja warriors of Japan expressed the potential value of mistakes in the saying:

"Failure is a treasure".

Of course there is a time for being correct in the classroom. The problem is that mistakes in the classroom tend to instantly be covered over in red ink as the teacher not only spotlights the student's error but then provides the correct answer. Every time a student makes a mistake there is an opportunity for him to develop a hypothesis on what type of error he made. Unfortunately that opportunity is often washed away in a tidal wave of teacher corrections. Julian Edge, in his book *Mistakes and Correction* (1989), maintains that when we teachers do correct our students "We have to be sure we are using correction positively to support learning." It is interesting that some theories on language acquisition (Krashen 87, Lewis 93 and Ur 96) state that not all errors should be corrected, and those that are corrected should as much as possible be treated not by the teacher but rather by self or peer correction. In other words, we should let students use their time for learning rather than using it for teaching them.

Not only is it important to consider error correction that supports learning, but as teachers we should also take into account how to create an environment where students feel secure enough to take risks and make mistakes. Was Rubin warning us adults that as we take on the responsibility and authority of being a teacher we should not discard the flexibility of a child's mind?

3. Have a High Tolerance for Ambiguity

"Don't be in the know. Be in the mystery." (Wolf, 2006)

Here is a riddle I tell my students.

A long time ago in my village there was a wise, old man. He had white, wispy hair and his eyesight had dimmed with the passing of time. He was very old but he was very wise. Whenever a person in the village had a problem they would go to him and seek his advice and never would a villager leave his home without a smile on their face and a song in their heart for he always listened carefully and spoke wisely to them.

One day two mischievous boys called Nathan and Peter decided to play a trick on the old man. Nathan caught a beautiful blue butterfly and said to his friend. "Peter let us go to the old man and ask if the butterfly I am holding in my hands is dead or alive. If the old man says it is dead I will release the butterfly into the air but if he says it is alive I will crush it and leave it dead at his feet. Either way he will be wrong." The two boys liked this trick and so they set off to the old man's house.

When the old man saw them coming he cried out "What good wind has brought you here my children. Come let us eat and drink and talk together!"

Nathan replied "No old man, we don't have time to eat or drink or talk together, you see we have come here today with a question. Could you please tell us if the butterfly I am holding in my hands is dead or alive?"

The wise, old man knew the mischievous boys and he looked at them for some time, and then he looked into the distance as if he could catch the answer on the horizon. Finally and slowly he brought his gaze back to the boys and with a gentle smile said.....

Let us leave the story for a short while and please consider a potential answer that does not involve the old man choosing between alive or dead. For the time being I would like to focus on ambiguity and how the school system relates to it. In my experience ambiguity or uncertainty is an element of learning that many Japanese institutions at the secondary, tertiary and international level have attempted to eradicate. This is achieved through the almost ubiquitous administration of multiple choice exams, which reduce education to a simple right and wrong, black or white mind set e.g.

What is the capital of France?

A. London B. Rio de Janeiro C. Tokyo D. Paris

This type of assessment tool is popular with some teachers because it requires less time and little mental energy to mark. It is simply a case of going over a test paper to check the correct answer has been circled. Another reason for the wide use of multiple choice tests lies in the classroom teaching that leads to the test. When the teacher gives all the correct answers in previous lessons, students have to simply memorize the material and circle the correct answer on test day. Furthermore, students often believe they cannot continue without total comprehension of a topic. Therefore, providing lessons where the students are given clues and then must individually or in groups discover answers for themselves through trial and error not only requires more time but also frustrates learners whose sole aim is to know the correct answer as soon as possible. To sum up, when ambiguity is extracted from the learning process the procurement of facts becomes seemingly smoother and easier to test.

Yet ambiguity is a fact of life and as we advance down the language learning road we come up against ever increasing amounts of language to comprehend in form, meaning and use. Well beyond the boundaries of language learning and throughout history all successful people have tolerated uncertainty. Pioneers, such as Captain Cook were not afraid to explore the uncharted Earth, Einstein and many other scientists have relished investigating the mysteries of the universe, and business people like Bill Gates had no guarantee of success when they embarked upon their entrepreneurial endeavours. Let us go back further in time and consider the first human learners and their process of gathering knowledge. One important factor in life for the first farmers and hunter gathers was predicting the weather. At first these people predicted the climate by observing the skies, which led to sayings such as "red sky at night shepherd's delight, red sky in the morning sailor's warning." Ancient farmers went further and realized a connection between animal behaviour and the changing weather. If they observed sparrows or chickens scratching for food in the evening or searching for a sleeping place high in the trees, or swarms of fireflies flying indoors in summer, they would understand these as warnings of rain. However, if birds of prey circled high in the sky and chickens and sparrows roosted early this was considered a prediction for fine weather. Our ancestors first observed nature in detail, then connected apparently separate events and then they acted upon the information. Mother Nature gave clues and hints but never just provided all the answers on a plate. The learner's effort was important. As educators our teaching strategies should have something in common with the teaching strategies of nature.

Maintaining a high tolerance for ambiguity means that even when the proverbial lights are out and we clumsily grope around in the dark for the answer we don't freeze or

give up. Many students when they cannot find the answer, quickly quit. These learners use phrases such as "It's too difficult" or "I'm not good at this topic." Good learners on the other hand embody single minded perseverance. When one method of solving a problem proves ineffective they change and use a different process. They know that success is connected to action. All learners make mistakes but successful ones don't quit. They keep moving.

What hinders this flexible, enduring mental attitude is our ego, our sense of self, which tends to be fixed and seeks to keep the world as it is. Because of this, humans many times confront learning opportunities with fear rather than mystery and excitement. We seem to feel better when we know rather than when we are in the process of learning. The good learner needs humility to reduce his ego and admit when he doesn't know the answer. Unless you start off with humility you will never get anywhere and ultimately humility combined with perseverance will show you the true nature of learning cycles. "As the first step you must already have what eventually will be the crowning glory of all learning; to know that you don't know and to not be afraid to find out" (Costa, 2000).

Let's return to the wise, old man and the two naughty boys questioning him whether the beautiful, blue butterfly is alive or dead. After gazing at the boys for a long time the old man with a gentle smile finally said, "Whether the butterfly that you hold in your hands is alive or dead, the answer lies in your hands." Hearing these words the boys paused and recognized how they had mistakenly tried to make a fool of the wise, old man and Nathan slowly opened his hands and released the butterfly into the air. This story took place a long time ago but its message is both as old as the hills and as fresh as today's newspaper: The answer to life and learning ultimately lies in our hands.

Conclusion

A pertinent question at this point may be "What would a good learner do with this article? The beginner level learner may read it once or twice and hope to commit some part to knowledge. An intermediate learner may write down specific parts of the paper he feels relevant, as writing more than reading helps to memorize information for the long term. An advanced learner would "do" the article because we humans learn by doing. Such doing involves various phases and may include the following actions:

1. Observe your students in each class and note 3 students who exemplify the good learner principles.

2. Observe yourself while doing your favourite past time e.g. sports, music, art etc. See which of the three principles you embody and how you can exercise them even more.
3. Teach the principles. Teach them to yourself in the mirror. Teach them to your cat. Teach them to a friend or partner.

Observe, teach and become the principles and then question them. Don't believe every single word in this paper. Discover for yourself.

If you are reading this journal then you are most probably a teacher. You may be wondering why I have written a paper on student behaviour which is intended for teachers to read. Why is it we educators should be behaving like good learners? It is because I believe the Japanese proverb about learners, teachers and their interconnectedness.

"The essence of a good teacher is a good student."

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