

## Attributes of a Good Language Learner

### Summary

*This issue of the ELIS Research Digest reviews the literature that focuses on identifying the attributes of good, successful, or effective learners of English. The reviewed studies showed that good language learners typically employed a greater variety of language learning strategies more frequently than their less successful peers. However, there were some indications that the strategy use between good and struggling language learners differed in quality rather than in quantity. Findings from the reviewed literature also suggested the significant impact of motivation on language learning success. Although both groups of learners generally reported being motivated to learn the language, there were striking differences in their motivational patterns. The good language learners were intrinsically motivated to learn unlike their struggling peers who tended to be driven by external motives. As suggested by some researchers, this contrast in the motivational patterns also accounted for the observed difference in the use of language learning strategies. The pedagogical implications of these findings are explored in the final section of this issue. Suggestions are given on how intrinsic motivation can be developed and sustained in the English language classroom.*

### Introduction

Acquiring competence in the English language is widely acknowledged to be a complex and daunting process for most learners (Brown, 2007; Gibbons, 2009). As noted by Zhang, Gu, and Hu (2008), the challenge of learning the language is even more pronounced in countries like Singapore where English is offered as a first language (L1) subject in the curriculum but where many are in fact learning it as their second language (L2). At the time of the Census of Population 2010, English was the home language for only 45.88% of students attending primary and secondary schools in Singapore (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011).

Over the past four decades, the field of language research has witnessed a heightened interest in the active role played by students in the language learning process. A substantial amount of research and scholarly discussion has been devoted to uncovering the key to successful language learning, specifically, what good learners do and/or possess that enables them to acquire the target language. The underlying assumptions behind this pursuit are that (a) some learners are more successful than others in learning a second language in the same learning environment; (b) the

characteristics of learners affect the way in which a language is learnt; and (c) good language learners share common characteristics (Brown, 2007). As Rubin (1975) suggested in her seminal work on good language learners, “if we knew more about what the ‘successful learners’ did, we might be able to teach these (learner) strategies to poorer learners to enhance their success record” (p. 42).

### Aims of the issue

Previous issues of this Volume have focused on the impact of the classroom and school learning environments (e.g., instructional design, teacher and student characteristics), in-school and out-of-school factors (e.g., attitudes to the language and its speakers, environmental support or hindrance), and of teacher-student interactions on students’ motivation in language learning. This issue goes on to look closely at students’ learning with the goal of unveiling the attributes of good, effective or successful learners of English. Students who generally perform well on tests and examinations or those who are rated as highly proficient and competent by their language teachers are regarded in this issue, as with many studies in the field (e.g., Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004; Green & Oxford, 1995), to be good, effective, or successful language learners.

This issue of the Digest begins with a brief overview of the seminal work done on the Good Language Learner (GLL) in the late 1970s. As seen in the subsequent section of the Digest, interest in the Good Language Learner remains strong in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with many researchers taking further steps in the exploration of how strategy use and motivation contribute to successful language learning. To forestall any disappointment, it should be made clear that this issue of the Digest does not seek to provide a definitive or exhaustive list of attributes and/or learner strategies of the GLL. Rather, the aim is to help educators better understand the language learning process so they can make informed decisions in the language classroom. With this in mind, the Digest concludes with a list of recommendations on what educators can do to help struggling learners of English.

### *Seminal studies on the GLL*

The initial spark that ignited an interest in the attributes of the GLL can be traced back to the work of Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975). Armed with the belief that there was no single method applicable to all teaching situations, both Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) shifted their attention away from quality teachers and teaching and instead focused on improving students' learning. Their aim was to uncover 'what the good learner does – what [their learner] strategies are' (Rubin, 1975, p. 43). According to the two research scholars, the strategies used by the GLLs differentiated them from their less successful peers.

In her landmark essay titled *What the 'Good Language Learner' can teach us*, Rubin (1975) postulated language learning to be dependent on three essential factors: aptitude, motivation, and opportunity. Acknowledging the difficulty of separating the three interrelated variables, Rubin (1975) went on to describe good language learners in terms of their use of learner strategies, what she broadly defined as 'techniques or devices ... a learner may use to acquire knowledge' (p. 43). Based on her informal observations of students in classrooms and her conversations with good language learners and language teachers, Rubin (1975) contended that good language learners:

1. were accurate guessers who were comfortable with uncertainty and were willing to try

out their guesses;

2. had a strong drive to communicate even if specific language knowledge was lacking;
3. were willing to make mistakes and were able to live with a certain amount of vagueness;
4. were prepared to attend to form and were on a constant look out for patterns in the language;
5. sought out opportunities to practise the language;
6. regularly monitored how well their speech was being received and whether their performance met the standards they had learnt; and
7. attended to meaning and used contextual cues to help them in comprehension.

To answer the question as to why some learners did better, Stern (1975) also drew up a list of 10 strategies good language learners used based on his review of the literature and his own experience as a learner and teacher. His taxonomy of learner strategies, as shown below, revealed similar qualities (e.g., willingness to practise, self-monitoring) of good language learners as those observed in Rubin's, but, at the same time, offered some additional insights (e.g., a personal learning style, learning to think in the target language) into the language learning process. According to Stern (1975), good language learners:

1. had a personal learning style or positive learning strategies;
2. had an active approach to the learning task;
3. possessed a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language and its speakers;
4. were equipped with the technical understanding of how to tackle a language;
5. possessed strategies of experimentation and planning with the object of developing their understanding of the new language into an ordered system and/or of revising this system progressively;
6. were on a constant search for meaning;
7. were willing to practise;
8. showed willingness to use the language in real communication;
9. possessed self-monitoring and critical sensitivity to language use; and
10. possessed an ability to develop the target language more and more as a separate reference system while learning to think about it.

Although the two classification lists are well-regarded for offering an instrumental view of the general approaches of the GLL, they have not been without their critics. A major weakness pointed out by many (e.g., Brown, 2007, Grenfell & Macaro, 2007; Griffiths, 2013) is that the lists are ‘conceptual and speculative’ (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007, p. 12) without firm foundations in empirical research. As admitted by the authors themselves, the lists were derived primarily from their personal experiences, informal observations, and their review of relevant literature rather than based on empirical investigations. Other scholars like Graham (1997) and Vann and Abraham (1990) questioned the validity of the identified strategies as being unique to good language learners. As Graham (1997) argued, particular qualities such as the willingness to practise might well be adopted by unsuccessful language learners. The more pressing question, then, is why these strategies work for some learners but not for others.

## Strategy use and the GLL

The work by Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) has since spurred many (e.g., Green & Oxford, 1995; O’Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, & Küpper, 1985) to undertake empirical research on the characteristics of the GLL. Specifically, those with an interest in cognitive psychology focused on the range of language learning strategies used by successful language learners. Among the different classification schemes, the ‘best known and most widely used’ (Griffiths, 2015, p. 427) is Oxford’s (1990) system for classifying ‘specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations’ (p. 8) into six groups:

1. *affective* strategies for anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and self-reward;
2. *social* strategies such as asking questions, cooperating with native speakers, and becoming culturally aware;
3. *metacognitive* strategies for evaluating progress, planning for language tasks, consciously searching for practice opportunities, paying attention, and monitoring errors;
4. *memory-related* strategies such as grouping, imagining, rhyming, moving physically, and reviewing in a structured way;
5. *general cognitive* strategies such as reasoning,

analysing, summarizing, and practising (including but not limited to active use of the language); and

6. *compensatory* strategies (to make up for limited knowledge) such as guessing meanings from context and using synonyms and gestures to convey meaning.

Developed by Oxford (1990) from an extensive review of related literature, this classification scheme of learner strategies informs the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning or SILL, a self-scoring survey commonly employed as a research instrument to gather information about the strategy use of language learners.

## Strategy use and language learning

A positive relationship between strategy use and successful learning has been reported in many studies (e.g., Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003). Green and Oxford (1995), for example, administered the SILL to 374 English as a Second Language (ESL) undergraduates in Puerto Rico to find out if the students’ language performance would vary with their strategy use as categorized in SILL. Results revealed a significantly greater overall use of language learning strategies among the more successful learners. A significant relationship was also observed between the students’ degree of language success and their use of strategies across the various categories listed in the SILL. However, as Green and Oxford (1995) discovered, there was a group of 23 ‘*bedrock strategies*’ (e.g., thinking about one’s progress in learning, using memory techniques to remember new vocabulary) which were used as frequently by the unsuccessful learners as their more successful peers (p. 289, italics in original). A closer look at the strategy choices made by the more successful group revealed an interesting finding. These basic strategies were often used by the successful learners in combination with other strategies frequently employed by them. This led the authors to speculate that the bedrock strategies might have ‘contribute[d] significantly to the learning process of the more successful students ... [without] being in themselves sufficient to move the less successful students to higher proficiency levels’ (Green & Oxford, 1995, p. 289).

Griffiths (2003) also found a significant relationship between students’ degrees of success in Eng-

lish language development and their frequency of strategy use in her study with 348 learners of English from 21 different countries and regions (e.g., Japan, Malaysia, Hong Kong). Data collected from the administered SILL showed that the more successful learners of English used language learning strategies significantly more often than their less advanced peers. A similar conclusion was reached in her later study where more advanced learners of English from 14 different countries and regions (e.g., Indonesia, Hong Kong, Taiwan) were found to employ a wider range of strategies more frequently than their peers (Griffiths, 2008). As with her earlier findings, there were noticeable differences in the patterns of strategy use by the language learners. According to Griffiths (2003, 2008) the strategies typical of the more successful students appeared more sophisticated and interactive than those favoured by less successful learners. Unlike their less successful peers, who relied heavily on affective and memory-related strategies, the more successful students were more inclined to use metacognitive strategies, as well as strategies related to the tolerance of ambiguity and the utilisation of available resources. The participating group of successful learners also reported a greater use of strategies relating to vocabulary, reading, and language systems. This led Griffiths (2008) to postulate that the strategy use between good and struggling language learners differed in both quantity and quality.

The growing interest in the relationship between language learning strategies and the degree of language learning success has also been evident in Singapore. Chang (1992), for instance, reported on a study conducted in Singapore, which investigated the learning strategies and metacognitive processes used by secondary and pre-university students. Although the collected data included students' use of learning strategies in subject areas (e.g., Science, Mathematics) other than English, the results did not differ from what was reported in the studies by Green and Oxford, (1995) as well as Griffiths (2003). As revealed in the student interviews and questionnaires, the successful learners made use of qualitatively better learning strategies and of metacognitive processes

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more frequently than their less successful peers. Also observed was the varying emphasis teachers placed on the teaching of learner strategies. Teachers who taught the less successful students reportedly believed more strongly in the use of strategies for effective learning as compared to their colleagues teaching the more successful group.

The positive relationship between learner strategy use and successful learning was also noted by Gu, Hu, and Zhang (2004) in their study with 18 lower primary students. Recognising the difficulty of getting young learners to self-report their mental processes, the authors employed probed introspective verbal reports which allowed them to uncover information about the strategies stu-

dents used when performing various language tasks (e.g., reading tasks, writing tasks, listening comprehension tasks). The analysis of the verbal reports suggested that successful learners tended to have a larger repertoire of strategies than their less successful peers who were found to have

only a handful of strategies at their disposal. The more successful learners were also found to appropriate more effective strategies according to the task at hand.

Hu, Gu, Zhang, and Bai (2009) also conducted a survey to investigate the language learning strategy use of upper primary students in Singapore. In an attempt to establish whether the use of strategies was related to success in English language learning, written questionnaires on listening, reading, and writing strategies were administered to more than 3,000 students from five Singapore primary schools. According to the authors, all three strands (i.e., listening, reading, and writing strategies) were found to produce convergent results and these results attested to a consistent relationship between strategy use and language success. As revealed in the overall results gathered from the survey data, successful learners of English generally employed a wider range of strategies more frequently and in a more flexible way than those who struggled with learning the language.

However, not all studies yielded clear positive results about the relationship between strategy use and successful learning. In his attempt to investigate the type of language learning strategies commonly used by young learners in Singapore, Loh (2007) administered an adapted version of the SILL to a group of Primary 6 students of varying proficiency levels. Data collected from the 193 completed questionnaires showed no fixed relationship between the learners' use of strategies and their performance in the English language. Some of the more successful learners reportedly employed learning strategies less frequently than their less successful peers. As Loh (2007) observed, patterns and frequency of strategy use seemed more related to the teaching methods employed by their respective teachers rather than the students' language proficiency. A study conducted by O'Malley et al. (1985) with 70 ESL high school students from Southeast Asia and Spanish-speaking countries also surfaced similar results. Although differences were found in the specific types of strategies used by the successful and less successful learners, no significant relationship was found between the frequency of language learning strategy use and successful learning. In other words, successful learners did not necessarily employ strategies more often than their less successful peers.

Studies focusing on the strategy use of less successful language learners (e.g., Porte, 1988; Vann & Abraham, 1990) have also provided counterevidence to the claim that the patterns of strategy use is related to successful language learning. Porte (1988), for example, conducted an interview with 15 less successful English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and found the frequency and range of strategies employed by these learners very similar to those commonly reported by GLLs. A similar observation was made by Vann and Abraham (1990) who explored the language learning behaviours of two struggling ESL learners from Saudi Arabia. Contrary to findings (e.g., Green & Oxford, 1995; Griffiths, 2003) that suggested a lack of language learning efforts made by the less successful language learners, data collected from the think aloud protocols and task product analyses revealed that these learners actively used a

large number of language learning strategies and that their strategy repertoire did not differ from those reported by good language learners. However, as noted by Porte (1988) and Vann and Abraham (1990), the problem with less effective learners was their inability to apply the strategies appropriately and flexibly to the task at hand. Despite emerging as active users of strategies, these language learners very often employed strategies in a less sophisticated and effective way than their successful peers. This led the authors to postulate that the strategy use of good and struggling language learners differed more significantly in terms of quality rather than quantity.

## Motivation and the GLL

Although findings from studies relating to the GLL seemed to suggest a similarity in the strategy use of most GLLs, many scholars (e.g., Griffiths, 2010, Norton & Toohey, 2001, Sparks & Ganschow, 1993) advised against making assumptions regarding the GLL based on these general cognitive characteristics of successful learning. Rather, there is a need to consider the influences of individual differences (e.g., age, gender, motivation) on the language learning process. As Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) argued, these personal characteristics of the language learner are in fact powerful background factors with qualities that can significantly impact different aspects of the learning process.

Among the range of learner variables identified, language learning motivation stands out as one of the most researched topics related to the GLL. Be it intrinsic (i.e., originating from within the learner), extrinsic (i.e., operating from outside the learner), instrumental (i.e., used as a means to an end), or integrative (i.e., used as a means of integrating with a desired community), motivation is popularly believed to play a pivotal role in determining language learning success (Ushioda, 2008). Much of this belief stems from its perceived status as a precondition for language acquisition without which learning may not even take place, let alone be sustained (Dörnyei, 1998). For this reason, many researchers (e.g., Chan, Dörnyei, & Henry, 2015; Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons, 2004) have taken on a sociocultural approach in exploring how motivation might differ-

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entiate between successful and less successful language learners in terms of their language learning endeavours and their strategy use. These areas will be reviewed in this section.

### *Levels of motivation*

As Ushioda (2008) pointed out in her article titled 'Motivation and good language learners', it is almost always assumed, from everyday experiences, that good language learners are motivated. Although this general observation may appear sound and incontrovertible, research scholars (e.g., Griffiths, 2010; Xiao, 2012) have attempted to confirm its validity with empirical evidence. In the study conducted by Xiao (2012) on the motivation level of Chinese EFL undergraduates, all the participants identified as successful language learners were found to be highly motivated individuals. Not only did this group of successful learners possess a clear understanding of why they were learning English, they were also acutely aware of the benefits brought about by their progress. This finding coincides with that found by Griffiths (2010) who examined the motivational patterns of two successful learners of English. Despite the differences in age, gender, and nationality, both the participating learners were found to exhibit high levels of motivation and were very focused on their learning. Similarly, the observation that good language learners are motivated has also been validated in the questionnaire study conducted by Zhang and Xiao (2006) with a group of 550 tertiary-level Chinese EFL learners. According to the authors, successful learners of English distinguished themselves by having the highest level of motivation. In comparison, participants who struggled with English reported having low levels of motivation.

While findings have consistently suggested that successful language learners are highly motivated, the inverse may not be true. Norton (2013) and Gordon (2008) cautioned that motivated learners did not always succeed in language learning and, by the same token, less successful learners were not always unmotivated. These propositions were confirmed in a recent study conducted by Chan et al. (2015). To examine teachers' experiences, the authors invited a group of six English language

teachers to identify salient learner archetypes and motivational patterns of secondary school students in Hong Kong. The teacher participants surfaced two learner archetypes commonly noted in the literature – the highly motivated, confident good language learner, and the unmotivated language learner who performs badly. However, not all learners could be categorised neatly under these two archetypes. As highlighted by the teacher participants, there were learners who exhibited similar traits to those of successful language learners but failed to achieve the desired results despite the considerable effort put in. These were also students who often reported feeling frustrated about their failures. Also identified

were students who were highly motivated and enjoyed school despite their struggles with language learning. Because of their happy-go-lucky disposition, they were better able to

move beyond their failures than their peers whose confidence was largely dependent on the outcome of their grades.

The results of students' self-reports have also revealed similar findings. In a recent study conducted by Muñoz (2014), 12 EFL undergraduates from two Spanish universities were interviewed about their language learning experiences and the factors that played a significant role in them. Although the interviewed participants differed in their level of English language proficiency, they shared a common understanding that motivation was the key to successful learning. More importantly, the less effective language learners, like their more successful peers, reported being highly motivated about learning English. Likewise, quantitative results obtained from a recent questionnaire study by Zarei and Zarei (2015) with 141 Iranian EFL learners revealed no significant differences in motivation among learners with varying levels of language learning success. In other words, learners who struggled with English were not necessarily less motivated than their more successful peers.

This lack of correlation between level of motivation and language competence has also been noted among English language learners in Singapore. In the survey study conducted by Tan (2007) with 77 secondary school and junior college students,

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Singapore adolescent students were found to be generally motivated to learn and use standard spoken English. Like their more successful peers, the less successful learners considered English to be of great importance and were highly motivated to speak and use the language well. However, as the findings suggested, the lack of positive influences from the school environment (e.g., absence of good role models, minimal active oral participation during English language classes) often deprived these willing students of the opportunity to gain competence in the language.

### *Types of motivation*

There are, however, critical differences in the types of motivation reported by the successful and less successful language learners. Studies that focused on the motivational patterns of successful and less successful language learners (e.g., Gan et al., 2004; Muñoz, 2014) revealed that GLLs tended to be intrinsically motivated. This driving force was, however, absent in learners who struggled with English. For example, when comparing the comments made by the participating EFL learners, Muñoz (2014) found that the GLLs very often expressed an intense love for English as well as their enjoyment in studying the language. This strong and consistent display of positive feelings towards language learning was however not observed in the responses made by the less successful learners. Although this group of learners expressed a liking for learning languages, they rarely spoke of an unconditional love for languages or of the pleasure derived from the learning process. Rather, English was often referred to as a means to an end (e.g., to travel, to access cultural goods), an indication that these learners were driven by a more instrumental type of motivation. This observation was also noted in Tan's (2007) survey study of Singapore adolescent students. While the less successful learners of English did not respond positively about their love for the English language, the majority of them felt that English carried a high utilitarian value for socio-economic mobility, and hence expressed a willingness to excel in their learning. In other words, their motivation to learn

English was mainly instrumental.

Gan et al. (2004) also conducted a qualitative study with nine successful and nine less successful EFL students from two Chinese mainland universities. Because English was a mandated subject from secondary school to university in China, the authors felt it was less relevant to focus on the influencing factors that encouraged the learning of English. Instead, their attention was devoted to uncovering the differing forces that drove and sustained the EFL students' language learning. As with the good learners reported in Muñoz's (2014) study, the identified group of successful learners was found to be intrinsically motivated in learning English. As a result of having enjoyed positive learning experiences on top of constant teacher praise and encouragement, the students developed an internal drive which helped sustain their interest and persistence in learning and practising English. In comparison, the less successful learners were more extrinsically motivated. Data collected from this group of learners indicated that compulsory examinations played an important role in influencing their approaches to learning English. As reported by the learners themselves, there was no genuine interest in learning or practising English. Hence, learning activities related to English were often neglected except when the compulsory examination was approaching.

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In a later attempt to examine the qualitative differences in the language learning attitudes and motivation among learners of English,

Gan's (2011) study involved a total of 18 ESL university students from Hong Kong, of which nine were identified as successful learners and the rest as less successful learners. As in his earlier study, the less successful students' English learning was motivated by examinations rather than by a genuine interest to gain competence in the language. Despite showing an awareness of the practical benefits of English learning and expressing instrumental motives for improving their English, the struggling learners were reluctant to invest in learning and often reported being frustrated with the learning process. According to Gan (2011), this reluctance to invest in their language learning

process was the result of a lack of self-sustaining internal motivation and a persistent negative outlook towards the learning resources and opportunities. In comparison, the more successful learners revealed a particular fondness for English as a result of having enjoyed many positive and satisfying language learning experiences. With this positive feeling as an internal driving force, their commitment to investing time and effort into learning the language tended to be more consistent and self-sustaining.

### *Motivation and strategy use*

Another major finding that surfaced in Gan's (2011) study concerned the influence of motivational patterns on students' choice of learning strategies. In the case of the less successful learners, many were found to employ learning strategies which were largely geared towards coping with examinations. This came as no surprise to Gan (2011) who perceived the choice of learning strategies by the less successful students as being primarily influenced by the extrinsic goal of performing well in the examinations. Because of the lack of self-sustaining elements such as a genuine interest in English and a positive attitude towards learning, the less successful students also struggled to engage in self-initiated learning. Hence, despite the availability of self-study opportunities (e.g., going for courses, reading in the library) and learning resources, these learners either failed to uncover how best to tap into these resources for their own learning or remained adamant that such opportunities could not produce any benefits.

Unlike their less successful peers who expressed reluctance to invest in their learning, the group of successful learners in Gan's (2011) study acknowledged the importance of taking charge of their own learning as a means to achieving their desire to 'become a member of the academic community that speaks the language' (p. 77). As a result of this integrative motive and their intrinsic interest

in the language, these learners were found to be actively searching for, and creating new language learning opportunities beyond the classroom. As well as tapping into the resources provided by their institution, the group of successful learners reported their constant engagement in a wide variety of learning strategies related to the four main language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Some of the commonly mentioned language learning strategies included talking to native speakers, attending additional courses, reading and writing a wide range of genres as well as watching movies and referring to the English subtitles. There was also a tendency for these learners to combine the use of several types of strategies instead of restricting themselves to one particular learning activity. Taken together, these self-initiated attempts to engage in goal-directed, meaningful language learning activities seemed to suggest the ability of the successful learners to exercise metacognitive or self-regulatory mechanisms needed for effective learning to take place (Gan, 2011).

In Singapore, the study conducted by Chang (1989) with secondary school students revealed similar findings about English language learners' motives and strategies. As with the students in Tan's (2007) study, the successful and less successful learners differed in their motivational patterns for learning English. In comparison to their more successful peers, the less successful students were more motivated to learn English for its usefulness in enhancing career prospects rather than for a genuine interest in the language itself. Also observed was a difference in learner strategy use. The less successful students tended to rely more on rote learning while their more successful peers adopted a more reflective approach in their learning that was further supported with more effective retention strategies.

Studies focusing on the relationship between the motivational patterns of English language learners and their choice of strategy use (e.g., Chang &

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Huang, 1999; Nikoopour, Salimian, Salimian, & Farsani, 2012) also provided some insights into why strategy use differed between successful and less successful learners. As reported in these studies, the commonly observed intrinsic motivation of GLLs proved to be an important determinant of the students' use and choice of language learning strategies. In their attempt to find out if the differing use of strategies among learners was the result of their motivational orientation, Nikoopour et al. (2012) conducted a study with 72 Iranian EFL learners who were tasked to fill in two questionnaires on motivation and language learning strategies. Intrinsic motivation was found to be positively and significantly correlated to students' use of metacognitive strategies (i.e., strategies concerning planning, organising, and evaluating the learning process) and cognitive strategies (i.e., strategies associated with identifying, retaining, rehearsing, and comprehending what was learnt). That is to say that the use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies increased as the intrinsic motives for learning and mastering English increased.

Similar findings were also surfaced in the study conducted by Chang and Huang (1999) on the motivational patterns and strategy use of 46 Taiwanese EFL learners. Results showed that intrinsic motivation was significantly and positively related to their use of strategies such as cognitive and metacognitive strategies. As acknowledged by Chang and Huang (1999) as well as Nikoopour et al. (2012), such strategies are regarded as deep processing strategies which 'facilitate understanding, increasing meaning mental associations, and are the most useful strategies for long-term retention of information' (Oxford, 2011, pp. 29-30).

A different relationship was observed between extrinsic motivation and students' use of language learning strategies. Although intrinsic motivation was often found to significantly and positively correlate with students' use of language learning strategies, findings from a study conducted by Sadeghi (2013) revealed no significant correlation between extrinsic motivation and students' strategy use. In other words, the level of extrinsic motivation for learning and mastering English was not related to an increase or decrease in students' use of language learning strategies. This stands in contrast to the finding surfaced in the study conducted by Chang and Huang (1999) in which extrinsic motivation was found to be re-

lated to students' use of memory and affective strategies. The learners in their study who were extrinsically motivated to perform in the examinations preferred surface level strategies like memory strategies because these strategies required less time and effort than the deep processing ones. Likewise, because learners with an extrinsic orientation often reported being frustrated and anxious during the learning process, the use of affective strategies was necessary to help these learners gain control over their emotions.

### Attributes of a GLL: Summary

The studies presented in the preceding sections have provided some insights into the attributes of a good language learner on top of those already identified by Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975). In particular:

1. Good language learners were often, but not always, found to use a greater variety of language learning strategies more frequently than the less successful learners. Likewise, these learners tended to employ strategies in a more flexible manner such as combining the use of several types of strategies needed for effective learning to take place.
2. There were some indications that the strategy use of successful and less successful language learners differed in quality rather than quantity. Unlike their struggling peers who often employed strategies in a less sophisticated and effective manner, good language learners possessed the ability to employ learning strategies appropriate to the task at hand. They were also more inclined to use deep processing strategies (e.g., metacognitive and cognitive strategies) which were deemed essential in facilitating students' understanding and long-term retention of information.
3. Good language learners were also found to possess high levels of motivation. However, this was not a characteristic unique to them. Their less successful peers were also observed to be motivated to learn English.
4. Despite the similarity in the level of motivation, the two groups of learners seemed to differ in their motivational patterns. Unlike their less effective peers who were more inclined to be driven by external motives and/or practical reasons, the good language learners

- showed signs of being intrinsically motivated to learn the language.
5. The difference in the motivational patterns appeared to be related to the learners' use of strategies. Results showed that intrinsic motivation was significantly and positively related to students' use of strategies such as cognitive and metacognitive strategies. In comparison, findings concerning the relationship between extrinsic motivation and students' use of strategies remained mixed. While some studies reported no significant correlation between the two variables, others suggested that extrinsic motivation was related to students' use of memory and affective strategies.

The general attributes of a good language learner have become foundations for developing various teaching approaches and learning strategies for English language learners (Brown, 2007). Yet, as demonstrated in the earlier section, these attributes are not always unique to the good language learners. Struggling language learners often share similar levels of motivation and enthusiasm as their more successful peers. However, the motivational patterns of the struggling language learners seem to prevent them from reaching their fullest potential. The next section presents some pedagogical considerations and opportunities for teaching and learning in the language classroom.

## Pedagogical implications

As evidenced in the preceding section, intrinsic motivation has a real impact on language learning success. With intrinsic motivators, students are more likely to invest effort in learning as well as to persevere throughout the long and arduous learning process. Even when faced with challenging tasks and/or topics that fail to arouse their curiosity, these language learners rarely have problems navigating their way around their initial disinterest and sense of helplessness (Gordon, 2008).

In reality, however, the classroom setting complicates the motivational challenges faced by students. As Brophy (2004) and Gordon (2008) pointed out, language learning is not always enjoyable. Mastery of certain language skills can in-

volve more tedious practice and students are often faced with tasks that fail to ignite any flame of interest. Likewise, as argued by many (e.g., Brophy, 2004; Parr & Glasswell, 2010), increased motivation does not necessarily lend itself to improved language competency or quality learning. Students may become more motivated when reading or writing topics of interest, but they may lack the knowledge and skills to complete the given task.

How then can intrinsic motivation be developed in the language classroom? Studies by Craig and Sarlo (2012) as well as Ryan and Deci (2000) have shown intrinsic motivation to be dependent on the fulfilment of psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in learning.

These needs can be fulfilled in the language classroom by: (a) strengthening students' sense of ownership, (b) improving their self-efficacy, and (c) encouraging positive teacher behaviours. These are covered in the subsections below.

### *Strengthening students' sense of ownership*

Providing choices to students whenever possible has been established by many (e.g., Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Craig & Sarlo, 2012) to be an effective means of strengthening students' feelings of being stakeholders in the teaching-learning process. As postulated by Wakamoto (2009), as well as Jacobs and Renandya (2015), such an idea is parallel to the paradigm shift towards a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning. Instead of developing a language education that hinges exclusively on teacher-centred approaches, the idea is for language learners to be given more autonomy to direct their own learning so that they too can play an active part in creating the learning process. Under this view, language learners can benefit from a well-balanced educational atmosphere that facilitates students' choice and ownership within a framework of support and guidance (Gibbons, 2009).

Facilitating students' choice and ownership in the language classroom can take different forms. According to Wharton (2011), students can be offered the simple decision to work individually or in groups. Likewise, they can be given larger scale

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*With intrinsic motivators, students are more likely to invest effort in learning as well as to persevere throughout the long and arduous learning process.*

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choices involving content selection and the design of instructional materials and activities. One commonly employed method in the language classroom is getting students to self-select materials that are of interest to them. Craig and Sarlo (2012) as well as Jacobs and Renandya (2015), for example, proposed the idea of giving students the power to choose their own reading materials as an attempt to improve their intrinsic motivation to read. According to these authors, students should have a role in deciding or recommending the types of books to be included in their classroom and school libraries. Giving students the option to choose from a range of teacher-selected supplementary books and other reading materials is also perceived to have a positive impact on students' engagement in reading activities (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004).

Learning through meaningful, hands-on activities is another instructional means that develops learner autonomy and has a positive impact on students' intrinsic motivation. Students should be encouraged to take ownership of their learning by actually participating in and experiencing the content in a meaningful context rather than being passive recipients of knowledge (Parr & Glasswell, 2010). Using drama in the language classroom, for example, is seen as an effective strategy for developing students' oracy skills (Smith, 2005). Not only are students encouraged to work collaboratively with their peers, the activity itself enables students to use language appropriately in real conversations. As Smith (2005) proposed, the active participation required in a drama activity helps develop students' communication skills. Students are also likely to become more motivated to use the language confidently and creatively in future settings.

Another teaching practice that engages students in meaningful hands-on activities is that of 'learners teaching learners' (Wharton, 2011, p. 34). This peer teaching approach stipulates that the language teacher gradually reduces the amount of frontal teaching to allow students to assume increased responsibility for class learning (Fisher & Frey, 2008). This often involves students taking turns to prepare a lesson (e.g., grammar, vocabu-

lary) which they will subsequently present to their classmates (Cooke, 2012). While the language skill or topic may be pre-determined, students are given the autonomy to decide the flow and delivery of the lesson and even the type of language activities their peers should engage in as part of their learning. With some guidance on how to plan and structure the learning activities, such student-led classes can enhance language learning significantly as students not only engage in learning content that they are inherently interested in but are also given the opportunity to shape the direction of the classroom discourse (Wharton, 2011).

While it seems ideal to provide students with the option to self-select topics and activities that are personally motivating, there are some intended curricular outcomes that can only be fulfilled through teacher-imposed instructional activities (Parr & Glasswell, 2010). In the language classroom for example, students may be motivated to

read and write personal recounts and narratives but it is as important for them to engage with a wide range of genres. One way of strengthening students' sense of ownership in such situations is through the

provision of authentic learning opportunities in the language classroom. In contrast to learning skills in a decontextualized manner, research scholars like Craig and Sarlo (2012) as well as Parr and Glasswell (2010) proposed the need to design language activities that (a) are relevant to the real world, (b) link instruction to real-life experiences, and (c) allow students to demonstrate their understanding to authentic audiences. According to these authors, students' intrinsic and instrumental motivation increases when they perceive the language activities as having value beyond the classroom. For example, the teaching and learning of procedural texts can be made more meaningful if students are encouraged to create a set of rules to be implemented in the class or design an instructional sheet for their younger peers on how a particular science experiment should be conducted (Johnson, 2008). Similarly, when learning to write arguments, students can start off by writing persuasive letters to their parents on a personal issue before moving on to crafting an opinion piece for the local newspaper (Mora-Flores, 2009).

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*Language learners can benefit from a well-balanced educational atmosphere that facilitates students' choice and ownership within a framework of support and guidance.*

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## Improving students' self-efficacy

Also surfaced in the reviewed literature on GLLs is the observation that struggling language learners, like their more successful peers, enter the language classroom with a keen interest in learning and improving their language competence. However, this initial interest is rarely sustained as a result of their own negative beliefs about their language competency (e.g., doubt about their learning capabilities, feelings of inadequacy regarding their own effort). Unlike their more successful peers who are more inclined to persist at a task even when they are confronted by difficulties, these learners seem to lack a positive sense of self-efficacy, 'confidence coupled with strategic problem solving, with a good measure of tenacity or stickability thrown in' (Parr & Glasswell, 2010, p. 28). At their worst, repeated failures at language learning tasks and examinations can cause a further decline in the learners' poor sense of self-efficacy, bringing about maladaptive behaviours such as procrastination, lack of future effort, and a reluctance to ask for help even when needed (Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001).

The teaching of language learning strategies and self-regulation in the language classroom has been recognised by many (e.g., Gong, Zhang, Zhang, Kiss, & Ang-Tay, 2011; Reid, Lienemann, & Hagaman, 2013) as a means to improving learners' self-efficacy. To ensure effective learning and the application of strategies, scholars like Woolley (2011) as well as Craig and Sarlo (2012) emphasized the need for strategy instruction to be systematic, explicit, and modelled, providing for a substantial amount of practice at each step. For example, instead of simply 'telling' students the answer to a reading comprehension question, the language teacher should make explicit the different strategies needed to determine the answer. This involves the explicit teaching and teacher modelling of why, how, and when a particular strategy or a combination of strategies should be used. As Schunk and Zimmerman (2007) delineated, teacher modelling is particularly useful with struggling language learners because such practices provide opportunities for students to witness how the strategy is applied in context. At the same time,

students gain first-hand experiences listening to their teachers' internal self-talk involved in the selection of strategies. However, teacher modelling needs to be followed by guided practice to allow students the opportunity to practise using the strategies independently with teacher intervention only when necessary (Woolley, 2011). A constant monitoring and reinforcing of the students' application of strategies should also be a priority in the language classroom so as to ensure that students become more confident in their ability to use these strategies independently across different task types (Craig & Sarlo, 2012).

Also important is the development of self-regulated learners, i.e., students who are capable of monitoring, directing, and regulating their own behaviours and actions in their educational pursuits (Paris & Paris, 2001). As surfaced in the literature, the teaching of self-regulatory strategies such as goal setting, self-instruction, self-assessment, and self-reinforcement is particularly helpful for the struggling learners who tend to

approach the task in a rather haphazard manner without making much of an attempt to evaluate or reorient their learning strategies (Schunk, 1996; Zimmerman, 2002). Hence, instead of focusing solely on the teaching of specific language strategies, many research

scholars (e.g., Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005; Reid et al., 2013) point to the need for self-regulatory skills to be taught in the language classroom. The development of more strategic language learners thus involves increasing students' awareness of the different strategies, getting them to recognise the benefits of successful strategy use, and teaching them to manage behaviours (e.g., negative self-talk, impulsivity) as well as monitoring strategy use. For example, when teaching students to write a particular genre, Harris and Graham (1992) recommended the teaching of a range of task-specific or genre-specific strategies (e.g., the organising, planning, and revising of narratives) alongside a variety of self-instructional tactics (e.g., identifying the problem, evaluating performance, and coping with anxiety). According to the authors, because students are taught how to manage their own behaviours as well as monitor and improve on

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their use of literacy strategies, they are more willing to persist in the task presented. At the same time, students feel more competent about completing the task well.

### *Encouraging positive teacher behaviour*

Apart from exploring the means to help build students' sense of ownership and self-efficacy, language teachers should also recognise their influence on students' motivation to learn. Specifically, the actual classroom behaviours displayed by teachers have been found to greatly impact students' intrinsic motivation to learn. Research that focused on teacher behaviour and student engagement (e.g., Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wild, Enzle, Nix, & Deci, 1997) revealed that students generally reported being happier and more enthusiastic about learning if they experienced teachers as warm and supportive. Likewise, students' intrinsic motivation could be enhanced simply through the perception that their teacher is intrinsically motivated towards the language activity (Wild et al., 1997). Students' motivation can also be undermined if they experience teachers who show signs of disinterest towards the task or the lesson. In other words, language teachers can positively impact their students' desire to pursue the intrinsic rewards of language learning if they provide interpersonal cues suggesting their own intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm for engaging in language learning.

The study conducted by Patrick, Hisley, and Kempler (2000) provided further evidence regarding the positive motivational effects of teacher behaviour. In an attempt to assess students' perceptions of their own motivations and their teachers' classroom behaviours, the authors first administered a questionnaire to 93 undergraduates. Findings from the questionnaire showed teacher enthusiasm to be strongly related to student intrinsic motivation and vitality even when compared to other teacher-behaviour variables (e.g., competence feedback, preparedness, knowledge of subject) that have been identified by others (e.g., Brophy, 2004; Keller, 1983) to be

potential influences. This prompted the authors to suggest that teachers who were viewed as having a dynamic and enthusiastic teaching style tended to have students who reported being intrinsically motivated about their learning as well as feeling energized in the class.

Even though maintenance of student motivation demands a conducive learning environment that actively supports the students' growing interests as well as their various learning needs, having a language teacher who shows enthusiasm in the teaching and learning process seems to be the critical 'boost' needed to mobilize students' interest in and excitement about language learning (Patrick et al., 2000). Since teachers have the ability to magnify students' level of engagement and motivation, a shift away from teaching styles that undermine students' motivation should also be considered a priority in the language classroom (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

### **Conclusion**

The ability to effect positive change in an English language classroom often involves understanding the impact learner and learning differences have on language learning success. While there are differences between good language learners and their less successful peers, educators should be mindful of the potential risks of categorizing their students into groups of successful and unsuccessful learners. By labelling their learners as 'incompetent' or 'unmotivated', educators are unconsciously shifting the ownership of failure to the students instead of assuming their share of responsibility (Johnston, 2004; Parr & Glasswell, 2010). As reflected in the final section of this issue, effective language learning can only take place if educators are willing to alter controllable factors such as their own teaching styles, classroom practices and instructional materials (Urdu & Scoenfelder, 2006). Ultimately, it is when both educators and students take up responsibility for their respective roles in the teaching-learning process that a genuine love for and interest in the English language can be nurtured in the classroom.

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