Who are we teaching? Good language learners?

Joe Siegel

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

Many teachers have probably encountered "good language learners" (GLLs) at some point. Although GLLs may be easy to identify, defining what makes them "good" is more challenging. Using cognitive and affective learner factors from second language acquisition literature, this article attempts to expand the definition of GLLs. It is suggested that multiple definitions of GLLs exist and that these definitions depend on point of view and context. The paper considers two well-known educational settings in Japan: traditional academic classes and non-academic conversation schools.

多くの教師は「優秀な言語学習者（GLL）」に一度は会ったことがあるだろう。このようなGLLに気づくことは容易だが、なぜ「優秀」なのか明確にすることは容易ではない。学習者の認知的・情意的要因に関する先行研究を踏まえ、本稿はGLLの定義を試みた。その結果、定義は多様であり、視点や状況によって変わることがわかった。こうした結果を日本においてよくみられる学習環境である、従来授業と英会話学校の面から考察した。

MIRRORS PROVIDE opportunities for self-reflection, and we prepare for various situations by looking in mirrors to make certain that what we see matches our destination. This paper seeks to look beyond what can be seen on the exterior in order to consider language learning psychology, specifically the internal workings of "good" language learners (GLLs). How are these GLLs defined? And what happens when the reflection in the mirror conflicts with the destination or context?

All teachers have met learners who seem to be "good" at learning languages, but what exactly does it mean to be "good"? The notion that definitions of GLLs may be context-dependent deserves consideration. It is possible that some characteristics and approaches are advantageous in traditional classroom settings, while other factors are more beneficial in more modern conversation schools.

From the outset, it is important to use the label "good" with caution. Being "good" at something is not a destination but an endless process; there is no fixed point for how "good" someone can be. Besides being context-dependent, the term "good" depends largely on point of view: Cultures, communities, teachers, and students may all have different concepts of "good."

The following section outlines two educational environments common in Japan, one academic, the other non-academic. Subsequent sections address various cognitive and affective learner factors related to GLLs.

Two contexts

Educational setting will often influence whether a learner should be labeled "good." The two settings considered here should be familiar to most teachers in Japan. One setting is traditional, compulsory and academic, such as a junior high or high school. The other is voluntary, often more interactive and sociable: the conversation school. These two learning environments can be placed on a continuum with the former at one extreme and the latter at the other. Many, if not most, classrooms will fall somewhere between the two extremes and some educational settings may embody a combination of the two. It seems probable that GLLs in one context are not necessarily GLLs in the other.

Table 1 displays some differences between these two learning environments. Anecdotal evidence from students and fellow teachers, along with my own teaching experience both in traditional and conversation schools, has been drawn on to comprise Table 1. These differences are important to the context-dependent descriptions of GLLs, and understanding the differences helps distinguish useful learner factors, such as styles, strategies, and personality traits.

Identifying context

Both teachers and students should be able to identify the context in which they are engaged. A grasp of the setting one is working in allows the participant to adapt and adjust to the environment so that chances for success are increased. In order for teachers and students to discern where on the previously mentioned

Table 1. Distinct settings

Traditional classroom	Conversational classroom
Academic purposes	Conversational purposes
Highly structured	Loosely structured
Teacher-centered	Student-centered
Often compulsory	Non-compulsory
Written tests	Oral tests / interviews
Metalanguage / rules	Conversational language / colloquialism
Linguistic competence	Communicative competence
Focus on academic achievement	Focus on communicative achievement

traditional classroom-conversational classroom continuum they might be, the following points offer a starting point for consideration: purpose(s) and goal(s) of study; teacher and student expectations; evaluation system and criteria; variety of classroom activities and time allotted to those activities.

This paper next turns to learner factors and discusses them in relation to the two ends of the educational setting continuum outlined above.

Learner factors

The previous section listed differences between two hypothetical educational settings. With those distinct learning environments in mind, this section will examine some specific learner variables in the form of cognitive and affective factors. In a study of Chinese

university students, Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004) found that student success depends on a "complex and dynamic interplay of internal cognition and emotion, external incentives, and social context" (p. 229). I suggest that some of these mental and emotional factors seem to "fit better" in one setting than in the other. Table 2 outlines the factors considered in this essay, which have been adopted from Brown (2000).

Table 2. Learner factors

Cognitive factors	Affective factors
Field independence / Field sensitivity	Risk taking
Left / Right brain orientation	Extroversion / Introversion
Reflectivity / Impulsiveness	Active / Passive orientation

The hypothesis in this paper that specific learner factors may be more beneficial in some educational settings than in others is not without shortcomings. First, all learners carry with them past learning experiences that probably influence their current approaches to learning. Secondly, the implication expressed is that learners have some control over which factors they choose to activate. However, some of the factors mentioned in this paper are probably more and some less changeable than others.

Cognitive factors

Cognitive factors have to do with our intelligence and the ways in which our brains function to process information. Cognitive factors can be thought of as being more objective, whereas affective factors are more subjective. Brundage and Macheracher (cited in Nunan, 1990) define cognitive style as "ways of

focusing on, taking in, and processing information" (p. 15). This section discusses some cognitive factors as they relate to GLLs; affective factors will be addressed later.

Field independence/field sensitivity

Field independence (FI) means being able to "see the trees from the forest." That is, it encompasses the ability to pick out relevant information from a field of distracters, to distinguish the parts from the whole (Brown, 2000). FI is likely to be a valuable skill when students complete worksheets and exams where minute details determine correct answers. FI can help learners focus on specific linguistic features such as verb form and word order. Therefore, high academic scores on language testing instruments may be attributed to FI. As Dornyei (2005) points out, "…FI individuals should do better on non-communicative, more cerebral tests, while [field sensitive] individuals should excel in more communicative situations" (p. 138). This does not mean, however, that field sensitivity (FS) has no place in traditional classrooms, only that a more FI orientation may be preferable.

Meanwhile, conversation schools, because of their emphasis on communicative competence, require a more FS orientation. A person has an FS preference if they attend to and identify a "field", be it abstract or concrete, more clearly as a whole rather than as constituent parts (Brown, 2000). Conversation schools promote interaction, discussion and fluency. Accuracy is seldom a priority. In these settings, students are often evaluated more by their ability to accomplish tasks fluently than accurately. Thus, FS seems to correlate better in conversation classrooms than in traditional classrooms.

Left/right brain

The left/right brain distinction is closely related to FI/FS. Brown (2002) calls the left brain the "zoom lens" because it al-

lows students to focus on specific details (p. 14). It is more logical, linear, and analytical. Therefore, left brainers may perform better on the evaluative instruments in traditional classrooms. In other words, having the ability to scrutinize language is beneficial on grammatical, rule-oriented tasks that specify single correct answers.

When it comes to conversation classrooms, the intuitive and holistic nature associated with right brain dominance seems more advantageous. According to Brown's (2002) analogy, the right brain is the "wide angle lens" (p. 14). Learners who use more of their right brain are probably able to focus on overall meaning without being preoccupied with correctness. They can pick up on situational clues that may be paralinguistic in nature. Right brainers are more likely to take into account communicative aspects including their partner's personality, attitude, and body language; they probably place more prominence on communicative as opposed to linguistic aspects.

Reflectivity/impulsiveness

Being reflective is like being the tortoise in the classic fable *The Tortoise and the Hare*. Reflectivity produces "slower, more calculated [decisions]" (Brown, 2000, p. 121) and may be beneficial in traditional classrooms because it aids accuracy. Reflective thinkers are those who determine several possible outcomes before committing themselves to any course of action. This should help learners achieve high test scores; however, in the case of timed tests, like TOEFL, some impulsive guessing may be useful.

On the other hand, when engaged in conversation, more impulsiveness would be advantageous because students should be more concerned with the spontaneity and time constraints of oral communication. If conversation students are too reflective, teachers or partners may become frustrated by slow responses, regardless of how accurate these may be. Impulsiveness in con-

versation schools also demonstrates willingness to (1) maintain conversation, (2) react naturally to what has been said, and (3) use circumlocution.

This section has discussed ways in which certain cognitive factors may be more beneficial for learners in educational environments that are located at opposite ends of a scale. While cognitive factors relate to mental activities, affective factors are associated with emotions and are discussed next.

Affective factors

Affective factors are those related to personality and emotions. These factors influence the world around us and are influenced by it. As mentioned previously, affective factors can be viewed as contrasting with cognitive factors. Three affective factors are discussed below: risk taking, extroversion/introversion, and active/passive orientation.

Risk taking

Risk taking is related to impulsiveness and guessing and is consistently described in the literature as a key factor of GLLs (Rubin, 1975; Brown, 2000). Students need to take chances with new material and in new situations because it helps them to "learn by doing" and to advance out of their comfort zone. Since uncertainties arise in both traditional and conversational classrooms, the ability to take risks, to venture guesses, or to participate in uncertain situations, is imperative. As Oxford (1990) observes: "Successful language learning necessitates overcoming inhibitions and learning to take reasonable risks, as in guessing meanings or speaking up despite the possibility of making a mistake" (p. 142).

Avoidance of risk taking in either of the settings mentioned above could lead to stagnation, and risk taking in moderation

benefits both academic and non-academic learners. Beebe prescribes "moderate" risk taking in order to avoid "wild frivolous risks…[and] meaningless verbal garbage" (cited in Brown, 2000, p. 15).

Introversion/extroversion

In traditional classrooms, more introverted individuals may attain optimum results due to the evaluation of written work, similar to the "traditional, structure-oriented, discrete-point foreign language instructional environment geared toward tests and assignments" mentioned by Oxford and Nyikos (1989, p. 293). Dornyei (2005) warns that too much "extroversion…has been found to have a negative relationship with academic success due to the introvert's greater ability to consolidate learning, lower distractibility, and better study habits" (p. 21). Such statements lend support to the notion that introversion benefits students in traditional classrooms.

In conversation schools and conversation-based classrooms, however, some extroversion is probably more advantageous. The dependent nature of conversation (two interlocutors are needed) makes extroversion clearly preferable. Conversation requires cooperation, and extroversion and an outgoing nature help facilitate it. In addition, outgoing learners are able to seek out and initiate learning situations (Rubin, 1975). The extroverted nature of conversation school GLLs is fairly easy to recognize as a positive asset, although Reiss (1981) points out the absence of conclusive studies. It must also be noted that too much extroversion can be detrimental, as overly extroverted students may monopolize conversations or be disruptive.

Passive/active orientation

It should be no surprise that GLLs are active in both traditional and conversation classrooms. Active learners are engaged, industrious, and curious. They involve themselves and get others involved. Active learners, for instance, routinely search for partners, initiate conversation, ask questions, and independently search for answers. These activities are done of the learner's volition, whereas, as Rubin (1975) has said, "…the poor learner passively does what is assigned to [her or him]" (p. 44). Given the enormity of the task of learning an L2, active learners will progress faster and further, regardless of context.

Summary of GLLs

Figure 1 recaps factors mentioned for traditional classroom GLLs:

Figure 1. Academic setting good language learners
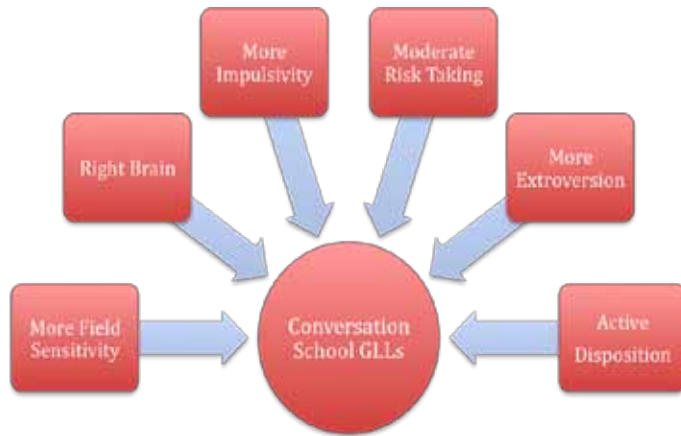
Figure 2 summarizes conversation school GLLs:

Figure 2. Conversation school good language learners

Illustrating the point

In order to exemplify the theoretical propositions outlined above, this section will detail two learners from the author's teaching experience in Japan. These learners seem to have dispositions well suited to a particular language learning environment. Descriptions of Masahiro's and Ayaka's characteristics and performances in their respective contexts are given below to exemplify the hypothetical context-dependent definitions of GLLs described above. These descriptions are based on the author's experience with and opinions of the students. No qualitative data gathered directly from the students was used. Pseudonyms have been used for privacy reasons.

Masahiro

In relation to the definition of a GLL in an academic setting, Masahiro is well equipped in several ways. In a university course which included heavy emphasis on discrete point tests, Masahiro excelled. He consistently achieved perfect scores on vocabulary and reading assessments. Based on his ability to memorize vocabulary lists and answer detailed reading questions, it seems as if he processes information from an FI perspective and may be left brain oriented. In other words, he is able to block out information unnecessary to his immediate goal of answering questions correctly. In addition, he often used the full amount of time allotted to complete his evaluations, which may demonstrate his more reflective nature. His cognitive factors usually served him well in this academic setting.

This same course also involved some communicative aspects; for example, students were sometimes asked to work in pairs to discuss videos, readings, and conversation-style questions. During these activities, Masahiro was rather timid and, from the author's viewpoint, somewhat uncomfortable. Masahiro was slow to answer when spoken to, which would be consistent with his reflective approach to test questions mentioned above. He wanted to respond in grammatically correct English and took his time in doing so. The timidity he displayed demonstrates a more introverted personality, at least in this English class. While this introversion may have made conversation difficult, the same trait may have helped him succeed on the academic evaluations. This trait likely allowed him to concentrate when preparing for and taking written evaluations. One area in which Masahiro does not match the GLL in an academic setting is his inactivity in class. Though he attended class regularly, he completed the minimum of work and seemed to lack enthusiasm for the class. Of course, other factors, both in and out of class, could have been influences. Overall, Masahiro got a high grade and was a GLL in this academic setting because written evaluations

comprised most of the grade. As discussed below, the type of evaluations used in class may suggest what characteristics will help determine if a particular student will be successful.

Ayaka

Ayaka would probably have some difficulty doing well in the same class Masahiro excelled in. She often had trouble memorizing new vocabulary and focusing on details that lead to correct answers on written evaluations. Her grammatical ability was also limited. Though she put a lot of time and effort into preparing for tests of English such as Eiken, TOEIC, and TOEFL, she was never able to achieve the results she wanted. After several years of diligent study, she decided that her test-based goals were unrealistic. She does not fit the definition of a GLL in an academic setting.

While her cognitive disposition does not seem to be suitable for an academic setting, Ayaka was a very successful student in conversation school situations. The same FS and right brain orientation that may have caused her to miss specific words or details aided her in achieving more holistic communication. If she misunderstood something during a conversation, she did not dwell on it. She would usually continue the conversation, concentrating more on the general topic and exchange of ideas. Of course, it is likely that she sometimes missed crucial information during some of these exchanges. In addition, Ayaka was quick to respond to interlocutors, which shows her impulsiveness. She was certainly able to operate within the conventional time limits of conversation. These characteristics served her well on spoken assessments such as responding to interview questions and describing processes.

The affective factors Ayaka displayed match the theoretical conversation school GLL described earlier. Due to her lack of grammatical precision, she often made errors during speech. Her willingness to take risks allowed her to continue communicating despite these errors. There were times, however, that she would have benefited from more controlled risk-taking. Meanwhile, her extroversion was obvious in her ability to involve multiple speaking partners on a variety of topics and to initiate as well as maintain conversations. This amiable and outgoing demeanor attracted people to her. Ayaka was also an active learner, often describing use of English outside the conversation school in study abroad and English volunteering opportunities. She sought to engage others in English on many occasions.

New considerations

The hypotheses outlined above were presented during a workshop at the JALT2009 Conference in Shizuoka, Japan. Workshop participants were asked to create GLLs using the cognitive and affective factors previously mentioned in relation to the contexts of more traditional and more conversational learning environments. In response to that task, new and interesting ideas surfaced. First, the point was raised that considering GLLs in relation to learning environments may not be by itself sufficient. Some participants pointed out that the type of evaluation used in any classroom likely determines which approaches may be most advantageous. In other words, regardless of classroom context, if a discrete item paper test is selected as an evaluative instrument, one learning approach may be better. The same would hold true if a speaking assessment were chosen. It is clear evaluation type needs to be understood when trying to detail beneficial language learning behavior.

Meanwhile, the notion that psychology varies by position was also made. While the presenter of the workshop alluded to individual student work in more traditional classes and more interactive student involvement in more conversational classes, this notion can be simplistic and problematic. Workshop attendees observed that students rarely spend all of their time in any one position. Rather, many classes consist of a mixture of individual,

pair and group work. Since psychology, especially the affective factors, will vary depending on which of these positions a student finds herself in, broad generalizations about appropriate approaches to language learning should be made with caution.

Conclusion

This paper has stated that the definition of GLLs depends on point of view and context in which learning takes place. These contexts can be placed at two ends of a continuum. The paper suggested that GLLs in traditional classrooms and conversation schools may differ with regard to cognitive and affective factors. Only six factors were considered here due to space constraints, and further discussion of other factors would be welcome.

As teachers, one of our goals should be to help students understand what will make them successful. When students look in the mirror and see themselves as GLLs, their motivation for language learning will surely increase, making their goals that much more achievable. There can be no drawbacks to giving students information about the learning process and discussing with them approaches to language learning. The worst that can happen is no change in learner style and behavior; a satisfactory outcome would be for learners to understand and attempt to improve themselves; an ideal outcome would be for learners to understand and actually improve learning style and behavior, ultimately becoming GLLs.

Previous publication

An earlier version of this paper appeared in the *Saitama Journal of Language Teaching, Winter 2009, Vol. 1*(3).

Bio data

Joe Siegel has taught EFL in Japan in various contexts for 8 years. He is currently a lecturer at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University. His research interests include language learning psychology, strategy training, and listening. <siegeljo@apu.ac.jp>

References

Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (4th ed.). White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.

Brown, H. D. (2002). *Strategies for success: A practical guide to learning English*. White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman.

Dornyei, Z. (2005). *Psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gan, Z., Humphreys, G., & Hamp-Lyons, L. (2004). Understanding successful and unsuccessful EFL students in Chinese universities. *Modern Language Journal*, *88*(2), 229-241.

Oxford, R. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Oxford, R., & Nyikos, M. (1989). Variables affecting choice of learning strategies by university students. *Modern Language Journal*, *73*(4), 404-419.

Reiss, M. (1981). Helping the unsuccessful language learner. *Modern Language Journal*, *65*(2), 121-128.

Rubin, J. (1975). What the "good language learner" can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly*, *9*(1), 41-51.