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Applied Linguistics to Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Unit 7: Focus on Learning and the Language Learner

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1. Learning and learner differences

Teaching does not necessarily result to learning, and learning is not necessarily a result of teaching – ‘good’ or ‘bad’. In fact, we all learn things even if no one teaches them to us. Of course, it is also true that teaching may help us learn, especially if we feel that what we are learning is of some use to us in the long run (though not necessarily of instrumental use), and we somehow enjoy the pedagogic process or feel that it responds to our expectations of what teaching should be.

All this is common knowledge just as it is fairly evident to most of us that learning is not equivalent to storing in our mind facts and dates. Learning something entails much more. And, of course learning a language is not equivalent to storing in our memory rules of grammar and vocabulary.

Task 1:

Think about what it means to learn something in our everyday social life and what it means to learn something as part of our educational experience in school or at university. Are there many differences? Then, think about what we mean when we say that someone (a) has learned a language, (b) is a ‘good’ language learner.

1.1 Variables affecting learning outcome

If learning does not depend exclusively or mainly on good teaching, what does it depend on?

Task 2:

Think about the following questions, answer them and then consult Table 1 below to check your answer:

- Does learning depend on whether we are interested or disinterested in the object of knowledge?
- Does it depend on whether we find it easy or difficult?
- Does it depend on whether we have developed strategies to cope with the particular subject matter?
- Does it depend on whether we have developed strategies to cope with what is required in school?

Learning actually depends on all of the above and much more. These are only some of the factors involved. As we attempt to understand the very complicated issue of how learning occurs or how teaching can facilitate learning, we should take into account the various variables that affect learning. These are listed in the below.

1.1.1 Affective variables (related to emotions and feelings)

Motivation:

- Instrumental and integrative motivation.
- Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Attitudes:

- towards the target language and culture.
- towards the users of the language.

1.1.2 Personality variables (related to personality traits)

Psychological profile Introversion or extroversion (in order to enter into conversation, to role play, etc.):

- Feeling comfortable or uncomfortable with new ideas and ways of doing things.
- Feeling comfortable or uncomfortable with experimentation and open-ended questions.
- Socialization Variables (related to how one works with others).

1.1.3 Socialization variables (related to how one works with others)

- Group membership: Working as a member of a group.
- Leadership qualities: Taking initiatives.

1.1.4 Cognitive variables (related to mental processes)

- Cognitive skills: Skills to memorize, to deduce/induce meaning, to analyze/synthesize/evaluate information, to distinguish between fact from opinion, cause from effect, etc.
- Learning and communication strategies: Learning strategies relate to input (taking in messages from others).
- Communication strategies relate to output (how we deliver messages to others). Note: Sometimes communication strategies can function as learning strategies.

1.2 Learning strategies

Oxford (1990) has developed an elaborate classification system of learning strategies. She defines *learning strategies* as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations”. Moreover, she distinguishes between direct and indirect strategies.

Task 3:

Read the definition of direct and indirect strategy types in Table 1 and try to match them with six learning strategies in Table 2.

Table 1: Types of learning strategies

DIRECT STRATEGIES to work with the language itself	INDIRECT STRATEGIES to manage learning in general
Memory strategies They are used for remembering and retrieving new information.	Metacognitive strategies They are used for coordinating the learning process.
Cognitive strategies They are used for understanding and producing the language.	Affective strategies They are used for regulating emotions.
Compensation strategies They are employed when using the language despite knowledge gaps.	Social strategies They are employed when communicating and learning with others.

‘Good’ learners employ a variety of strategies for effective language learning. Here are some of them.

Table 2: Six learning strategies to employ

1. Taking risks wisely: Pushing yourself to take risks in a language-learning situation, even though there is a chance of making a mistake or looking foolish. Risks must be tempered with good judgment.
2. Remembering new language information according to its sound: One example is a way of learning FL vocabulary. You think of a word in your LI (or any other language) which sounds like the word you are trying to learn. You try to associate the two words. For example, if you are trying to learn the Russian word brat (meaning 'brother'), you could associate it with the English word brat (an 'annoying person'). Bringing to mind this association may help you remember the Russian word. Another way often used is by using rhymes to remember a word (rat - cat).
3. Finding out about language learning: Making efforts to find out how language learning works by reading books and talking with other people, and then using this information to help improve one's own language learning'.
4. Cooperating with peers: Working with other language learners to improve language skills. This strategy can involve a regular learning partner or a temporary pair or small group. This strategy frequently involves controlling impulses toward competitiveness and rivalry.
5. Switching to the mother tongue: Using the mother tongue for an expression without translating it, as in Ich bin eine girl [used when a native speaker of English learning German cannot remember the German word for 'girl']. This strategy may also include adding word endings from the new language onto words from the mother tongue.
6. Repeating: Saying or doing something over and over: listening to something several times; rehearsing; imitating a native speaker.

Task 4:

At the beginning of this Unit you identified some characteristics of good language learners based on your personal experience. Compare your suggestions on the characteristics of good language learners with the ones identified by research studies below.

Seven hypotheses about good language learners:¹

1. The good language learner is a willing and accurate guesser.
2. The good language learner has a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from communication. S/he is willing to do many things to get his message across.
3. The good language learner is often not inhibited. S/he is willing:
 - to appear foolish if communication requires it,
 - to make mistakes in order to learn to communicate,
 - to live with a certain amount of vagueness.
4. In addition to focusing on communication the good language learner is prepared to attend to form as well as meaning and appropriate use. S/he is constantly looking for patterns in the language.
5. The good language learner practices on his or her own.

¹ From: Rubin 1975, adapted by Naiman et al. 1978.

6. The good language learner monitors his/herself and the speech of others. That is, s/he is constantly attending to how well his/her speech is being received and whether his/her performance meets the standards s/he has learned.
7. The good language learner attends to meaning. S/he knows that in order to understand the message it is not sufficient to pay attention to the language or to the surface form of speech as well as to what is said or remains unsaid.

Task 5 :

Think back to your experiences as language learners and try to remember cases of 'good' and 'bad' language learners that were in the same class as you. What was it that made you think they were 'good' or 'bad' at learning English? List the characteristics of good language learners.

2. Facilitating learning

Is it possible to facilitate learning by intervening so that a teacher may contribute positively to altering negative factors involved in learning? Yes it is. In fact, that is what all interested teachers seek to do whether they realize it or not. Here are some ideas.

Techniques for increasing/sustaining motivation²:

- Providing sufficient variety of input (listening and reading), of interaction and of activity to allow students to work in their own style and with their own strategies.
- Providing learners with a real purpose to communicate (speaking/writing).
- Showing awareness of differences in motivation, in emotional responses, in strategies etc., encouraging students to build awareness of their own preferences.
- Providing tasks which are challenging and related to learner needs. Tasks with achievable goals so that students can enjoy some measure of success and satisfaction.
- Creating a supportive classroom environment where students feel comfortable to make mistakes and take risks.

Techniques for developing learners' cognitive skills:

The development of cognitive skills is dependent on the functions of the brain and the way the brain functions depends on a variety of factors which are both biological (e.g., age) and social (e.g. amount and quality of input from the social environment). FL learners' cognitive skills are already developed when they come to a foreign language course, though groups of learners and individuals exhibit differential cognitive development and skills. These can be further developed through a variety of techniques and task types.

Task 6:

Look at the activities in **Appendix 1** and decide what types of cognitive skills are involved in carrying out these activities successfully.

Techniques for developing learning strategies:

In order to help learners develop the direct and indirect strategies in Table 2, teachers may use a variety of techniques.

² Based on Hedge (2000), Willis (1996), Nunan and Lamb (1996).

Task 7:

Study the activities in **Appendix 2**. Explain if the tasks help learners develop any of the strategies described in Table 3.

Table 3: Helping learners develop language learning strategies.

Strategies	Description
Memory	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creating mental linkages.• Applying images and sounds.• Reviewing well.• Employing action.
Cognitive strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practicing.• Receiving/sending messages.• Analysing and reasoning.• Structuring input/ output.
Compensation strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Guessing intelligently.• Overcoming limitation in.• speaking and writing.
Meta-cognitive strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Centering learning.• Arranging / planning learning.• Evaluating learning.
Affective strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lowering anxiety.• Encouraging yourself.• Taking emotional temperature.
Social strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Asking questions.• Cooperating with others.• Empathising with others.

The main reasons for learner strategy training are:

- It contributes to the main goal of the development of communicative competence.
- It helps learners to become more self-directed.
- It helps learners think in a problem-oriented fashion.
- It facilitates the development of the person as a whole.
- It helps them become conscious of the strategies they have already developed and those they have not.

3. Autonomy and self-direction in Foreign Language Teaching/Learning

If we are to continue learning all our lives, as we should, rather than to stop learning when we leave school or university, we should develop the attitude, ability and skills required for what we call 'autonomous' learning. But what is that? How do we define the notion?

Task 8

Do you think that “autonomous learning” differs from “self-access” or “self-directed learning”? How?

3.1 Arguments for developing learner autonomy

Ethical: The individual has the right to exercise his/her choices in learning and not to passively accept choices made by social institutions. One of the main aims of education is to help individuals to develop positive attitudes towards lifelong learning and to acquire skills for self-study.

Economic: Society does not have the resources to provide individualized instruction in every area of learning for each individual. Therefore, individuals must identify their own learning needs and seek out opportunities for learning (individually or cooperatively).

Psychological: This argument draws support from cognitive psychology which maintains that learning is a process of problem solving and that learning is more meaningful and permanent when it is directly related to learner needs and when learners are actively involved in the learning process.

Good language learners have been found to:

- find their own way, taking charge of their learning,
- organize information about language,
- make their own opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom.

Task 9

Share your thoughts with the colleague sitting next to you. Decide in what ways and in what areas the two of you are autonomous learners and what kind of autonomous learning techniques you use.

Task 10

Look at the activities of **Appendix 3**. Decide which of them foster the idea of autonomous learning and explain why.

Mini project

Appendix 4 contains an amended activity suggested by Hedge (2000, pp. 40-41), asking you to look at the list below –a list of “hopes” about the roles and responsibilities of EFL teachers and learners. Revise and add to this list your own realistic hopes, as these are shaped by the Greek social and educational context as well as your own experiences as learners and as teacher-trainees.

4. References

- Hedge, T. (2000). *Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers*, Oxford University Press.
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Appendix 1



Communication Task 1: Work in pairs. Study the picture and decide what the woman is going to do. Tell your partner. Begin like this: "I bet she's going to....." Your partner should react in any way s/he thinks suitable, agreeing or disagreeing with you. Then change roles.

Communication Task 2

Look at what good old movies are playing this week. Decide on two that you'd like to see and explain why.

Weekly film guide



All that Jazz is an x rated quality film that also made it as a box hit. In this dazzling musical directed by Bob Fosse, Roy Schneider's seductive performance is impressive.

Atlantic City an AA rated film directed by Louis Malle. It's an amiable semi-gangster movie in which Burt Lancaster, as underworld hanger-on, gives a fine, quiet performance.

Being There an AA rated film where Peter Sellers is at his best. The movie, a tragicomedy with heavy strokes of ironical British humor, is about a simple-minded gardener taken by classy American society as a political genius.

The Blue Lagoon is an AA rated film with the adolescent star, crowned with popularity, Brooke Shields. The movie, a romantic story for a quiet evening, is about two children growing to sexual maturity in isolation on a Pacific Island.

Stardust Memories is a film in which Woody Allen gives biographical entertainment; relations with girl, reaction to conventional fans. He is, once again, Woody Alien: quality psychoanalysis filmed in Hollywood.

Tootsie is Sidney Pollak's AA rated film with Dustin Hoffman and Jessica Lang who got an Oscar award as supporting actress This American comedy is about an actor who's failed and becomes an actress in order to succeed as a star.

Appendix 2

(From: *Task Way English 3*)

TASK-1



Look at the contents concerning this type of school, made by people in some way involved with it and try to (a) indicate whether the comment is "P" (parent's comment), "T" (teacher's comment) or "S" (student's comment); (b) tick whether it is a "pro" statement or a "con" statement.

TASK-2



Using these statements as models, make pro and con statements to describe the type of school YOU go to.

10. A NEW KIND OF SCHOOL

INFORMATION

In the U.S., some years ago, a new type of school, the so-called "Freedom School" appeared. The conservatives criticized it, the progressives cheered for it. Some parents, teachers and students were in favour and others against it.

	P	T	S	+	-
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					

1. One of our main principles is to make children become creative.

2. Too much initiative and very little knowledge. That's what they are giving them there.

3. Oh, and something else. They make me feel so sure about myself!

4. They are fantastic. They let us do a lot of things by ourselves and that's great.

5. Do you think I can trust a school that never punishes children? Things used to be different in "my days."

6. It's much simpler than that. I only have to find out the child's interests and help him or her.

6. BUYING A FAMILY CAR

THE TASK



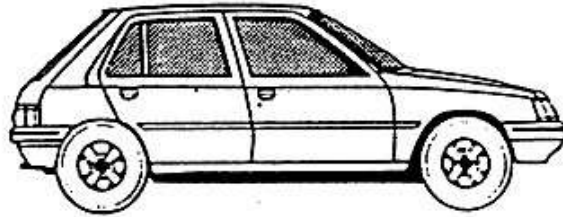
EXTRA

Imagine that you are the members of a family which is about to buy a family car. Each one of you has a different opinion as to which car to buy, and you disagree.

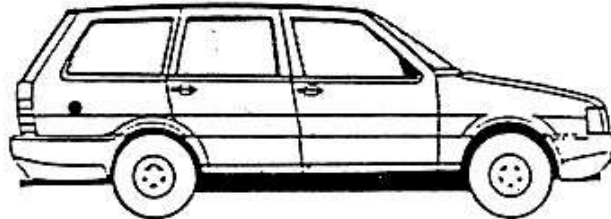
Before you begin, you must decide:

- Who each one of you is and which car you are going to defend
- What the family needs the car for exactly

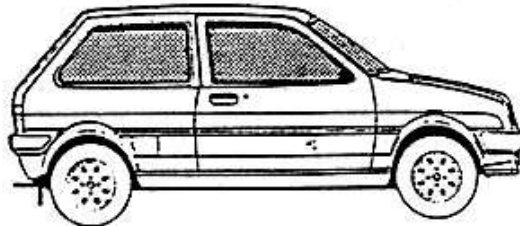
Your job is to try to persuade each other that the car of your choice is a more suitable buy than the rest. When you reach a decision, announce it to the class, and explain the advantages of the car you chose.



SUZUKI ESTEEM		Length:	174 inch.
Engine:	1598 cc	Width:	67 inch.
Top Speed:	120. mph	Petrol:	28 mpg
Doors:	4	Price:	£6.199



CITYVAN		Length:	164 inch.
Engine:	1490 cc	Width:	64 inch.
Top Speed:	96.8 mph	Petrol:	27.2 mpg
Doors:	4	Price:	£6.299



TEISSAURUS		Length:	143 inch.
Engine:	1398 cc	Width:	63 inch.
Top Speed:	103 mph	Petrol:	29.8 mpg
Doors:	3	Price:	£5.925

Appendix 3

(From: *Natural English*, O.U.P. 2002)

extended speaking

decisions, decisions

you're going to:

collect ideas
read a true story about a couple who have to make an important decision.

reach a decision
discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the options they have and decide on the best one.

listen
find out what the couple's decision is.

but first ...
Look back at the **extended speaking** boxes in this unit. You can use this language in the activity.

collect ideas

1 Think! When you have to make an important decision (e.g. change jobs, end a relationship), do you:

- 1 make the decision yourself or ask others for advice?
- 2 think about it for a long time or make a quick decision based on your feelings?

2 Read the case study with the glossary.

3 Think! Make notes in the table on one or two advantages and disadvantages of each possible solution.

4 Compare ideas with a partner. Add any new ideas to your notes.

	advantages	disadvantages
1 photography business		
2 Rowena going back to work		
3 retraining in business		
4 moving to a different area		

CASE STUDY

Andrew and Rowena got married a year ago and are expecting a baby this year. Rowena has a well-paid job as an accountant, working in London (an hour away by train). Andrew has been working as an engineer in the aviation industry for ten years, but his company is closing down and there are no other similar jobs in the area. They'd like to stay in the same village, as the rest of Andrew's family are close by. They have to make a difficult decision. These are the ideas they have discussed so far:

- 1 Andrew enjoys photography very much, and has thought about starting a local photography business. There isn't much **competition** from other photographers nearby, but he will need to borrow money from the bank to start up the business.
- 2 Rowena could go back to work after the baby is born and be the main **breadwinner**. Andrew could stay at home and look after the baby.
- 3 Andrew could probably find a good job in the aviation industry, but they'll have to move to a different part of the country.
- 4 With his commercial experience, Andrew could retrain and go into business management: there's a one-year course at his local college. If he does that, he'll probably be on a low salary for a year or two after retraining.

glossary

aviation industry industry which makes aeroplanes


competition other people who want the same business as you and want to be more successful

breadwinner person who earns money to support the family

reach a decision

- 5 Work with another pair. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each solution. At the end, take a vote and decide on the best one.
- 6 Find a new partner. Say what your group decided, and why.

listen

- 7  Listen to Andrew. What have they decided to do?
- 8 Listen again. Are the disadvantages that Andrew and Rowena mention similar to your predictions in the table on p.78?
- 9 How many people in your group made the same final decision as Andrew and Rowena?



test yourself!

How well do you think you did the extended speaking? Mark the line.

0 _____ 10

From this unit:

- 1 write the missing particle or preposition in these phrases: *look — a baby, give — a job, turn — an offer, carry — working, apply — a job, set — a business, the advantage — working, what sort — job?*
- 2 tell a partner this information about you: *your surname, nationality, date of birth, occupation, mother tongue.*
- 3 mark the stress on these words: *enrol, deposit, brochure, certificate, qualification.*

Complete the sentences. The meaning must stay the same.

- 1 We'll be late if we don't go now.
We'll be late unless _____.
- 2 Thanks very much for your help.
Thanks. You _____.
- 3 I think it's a bad idea.
I don't _____.
- 4 I didn't go to work today.
I took _____.

Correct the errors.

- 1 If they will move to another area, they will be unhappy.
- 2 I always feel better after go to the gym.
- 3 The main advantage to work there is the salary.
- 4 I'm not agree with you.

Look back at the unit contents on p.69. Tick ✓ the language you can use confidently.

Appendix 4

WHAT TEACHER-TRAINEES HOPE FOR IN A GREEK EFL CLASSROOM		
Students		
1	We hope to find the students involved in what they are doing, contributing to it and getting satisfaction from it on both a personal level and a social level.	<i>That is to say, I hope not to find them on concentrating merely on coming up with the correct answers or on grinding out correct sentences and free conversations for the sake of the lesson.</i>
2	We hope to find students comfortable and relaxed, even when they are in the midst of intense study activity and rigorous interaction	<i>This does not mean that they are loafing in the classroom, since students who feel comfortable are less likely to loaf. Also, it does not mean that they are afraid of being punished in some way or other if they do not meet the teacher's expectations.</i>
3	We hope to find students listening to one another, and not just to the teacher, helping and correcting each other.	<i>This means that students do not expect all knowledge and support from the teacher but that they recognize their own contribution to their learning process and that of their fellow students.</i>
4		
Teachers		
5	We hope that the teacher is in control of what is going on in her/his class.	<i>This does not mean that everything the students do comes as a direct response to a specific cue from the teacher.</i>
6	We hope that the teacher allows/ encourages / requires students to respond on the basis of their own experiences, whether they are producing an utterance or performing a communicative activity. Also, we hope that the teacher makes appropriate choices among a range of techniques.	<i>This does not mean that they are not given guidance with regard to <u>what</u> to say and especially <u>how</u> to say it.</i>
7	We hope that the teacher seems relaxed and but firm in voice and manner, giving information about the appropriateness or correctness of what the students do rather than criticizing or praising them.	<i>That is, I hope the teacher does not directly or indirectly say to students things like: "Now remember..." "You should always..." "You are a failure / very successful in what you do..." " Do this so that I may judge you on it..."</i>
8		

The classroom and school facilities		
9		
10		
The teaching-learning materials and aids		
11		
12		

Notes

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