

How to be a good learner

- Why is it difficult to describe a good learner?
- How important is the students' motivation?
- Who is responsible for learning?
- What characteristics do good classroom learners share?
- What's special about teaching adults?
- What are the different levels?
- How should we teach the different levels?

Why is it difficult to describe a good learner?

Many factors need to be taken into account when considering the qualities of good learners. What are their backgrounds, for example, their past learning experiences? Why are they in the classroom? Why is one study method appropriate for student A but not for Student B? Because each student brings a unique personality to the classroom, it is often difficult to assess the factors involved.

Research results don't necessarily tell us what we really want to know either. For example, a recent university research team in Britain wanted to find out why some children who learned musical instruments became very good at it while others remained at best competent. They found that the most common factor was simply the number of hours the children had practised.

It is comforting when old sayings like 'practice makes perfect' come true! But the research still leaves us with questions. It doesn't tell us why some children practise more than others, nor about the type of practice they do. Neither does it account for those exceptional children who become expert players even when they do not practise as much as others.

Teachers have some commonly-held views about good learners. Anecdotally, they will tell you that the students who do best are the ones who always do their homework, for example. We might be able to say, therefore, that doing homework is the trademark of a good learner. But again we are left with questions. Why do some people do homework while others don't? Why do some exceptional students succeed who don't do homework? Is it the homework itself that makes the difference or the underlying state of mind of the student?

What we need to find out is whether there are any generalisations which will help us to encourage habits in students which will help them, individually and/or collectively. Then we can add them to the kind of research findings described here.

How important is the students' motivation?

One of the most successful language learning experiences we know about took place towards the end of the Second World War when the American military needed to train their personnel in the languages of the countries they would have to administer and/or deal with. In short intensive courses, the students learnt fantastically fast. Likewise in Britain, Air Force personnel were taken to Cambridge and taught Russian, for example, with enormous success.

Whatever we think of the teaching methods used – or the reasons for the language learning – the teachers and students in these cases had a number of things on their side: they were highly motivated, they really wanted to learn and they had powerful reasons for doing so – including, of course, a fear of failure.

The desire to learn can come from many causes. Perhaps the students love the subject or are simply interested to see what it is like. On the other hand, they may have a practical reason for their study: they want to learn an instrument so they can play in an orchestra, learn English so they can watch American TV or work with English people, study Tai Chi so that they can become fitter and more relaxed, or go to cookery classes so that they can prepare better meals.

Famous research carried out in the second half of the twentieth century by Gardner and Lambert suggested that students who felt most warmly about a language and who wanted to integrate into the culture of its speakers were more highly motivated (and learnt more successfully) than those who were only learning language as a means to an end (e.g. getting a better job). In other words *Integrative* motivation was more powerful than *Instrumental* motivation. But whatever kind of motivation students have, it is clear that highly motivated students do better than ones without any motivation at all.

If good learners are those that have a positive attitude towards their subject, what can we do if we get students who aren't like that? Will students whose motivation is only skin-deep be bad learners? Will people who are not extremely keen to learn automatically fail?

One of the main tasks for teachers is to provoke interest and involvement in the subject even when students are not initially interested in it. It is by their choice of topic, activity and linguistic content that they may be able to turn a class around. It is by their attitude to class participation, their conscientiousness, their humour and their seriousness that they may influence their students. It is by their own behaviour and enthusiasm that they may inspire.

Teachers are not, however, ultimately responsible for their students' motivation. They can only encourage by word and deed. Real motivation comes from within each individual.

Who is responsible for learning?

In many modern language institutes, a sizeable percentage of time is given over to 'self-study'. Typically, the institute will have a large room equipped with textbooks, exercises, tape and video recorders (with individual headphones), reference books such as dictionaries, grammars etc, fiction and non-fiction books and magazines. There will be a competent teacher on duty to offer help and advice, but the idea is that the students should go in to this 'self-access' centre and choose what they want to do based on their own interest and needs. They can decide whether they want to go to the centre in other words, and, once there, they can take charge, do what they think is best, *take responsibility* for their own learning.

The underlying philosophy behind self-access centres is that students who are prepared to take such responsibility for their own learning (by studying in their own time, doing homework, thinking carefully about what would be best for them) are good learners. Good learners, in other words, don't just wait to be taught.

Of course, not every school has self-access facilities. They are expensive to set up and demand space and time. But the principle – that learners should take charge of their learning – is one that we need to promote with or without such physical resources. Students need to be aware that we cannot teach them English unless they themselves are prepared to take some of the strain. Learning is a partnership between teachers and students.

This message may be difficult for some students from certain educational backgrounds and cultures who have been led to believe that it is the teacher's job to provide learning. In such cases, teachers will not be successful if they merely try to impose a pattern of learner independence. In such cases, it is much better to start very gradually with a piece of homework, for example, or some solowork in class where individual students have to investigate a grammar issue or solve a reading puzzle on their own. As students get used to working things out for themselves and/or doing work at home, so they can gradually start to take their own decisions about learning.

Getting students to do various kinds of homework like written exercises, compositions or study is the best way to encourage student autonomy. What is important is that teachers should choose the right kind of task for the students. It should be within their grasp, and not take up too much of their time – or occupy too little of it by being trivial. Even more importantly than this, teachers should follow up homework when they say they are going to, imposing the same deadlines upon themselves as they do on their students.

As teachers, then, it is up to us to encourage students to take charge of their learning by guiding them in their choice of work either at home or in self-access centres (if they exist) and by being available to discuss individual plans of study. The most important thing, however, is to be sensitive to their own expectations of learning and act accordingly.

What characteristics do good classroom learners share?

Inside the classroom, some learners seem to take advantage of what's going on more than others. It looks as if they are more engaged with the process of learning than their colleagues. Teachers are aware of this too. They will frequently say that successful students possess some or all of the following characteristics.

A willingness to listen: good learners listen to what's going on – not just in the sense of paying attention, but also in terms of really listening to the English that is being used, soaking it up with eagerness and intelligence.

A willingness to experiment: many good learners are not afraid to 'have a go'. They are prepared to take risks, to try things out and see how it works. Of course, not all successful language learners are extroverts, but the urge to use the language (loudly or quietly) is an important one.

A willingness to ask questions: although some teachers can become irritated by students who are constantly asking difficult (and sometimes irrelevant) questions, the urge to find out why is part of a successful learner's equipment. Good teachers frequently invite students to ask if they don't understand something. Good learners do this, judging when it is appropriate to do so and when it is not.

A willingness to think about how to learn: good learners bring or invent their own study skills when they come to a lesson (and/or when they study on their own). They think about the best way to write vocabulary in their own wordbooks, for example, the best way to read a text (slowly, translating every word? or quickly, trying to get a general understanding?), the best method of drafting and re-drafting a piece of writing.

A willingness to accept correction: good learners are prepared to be corrected if it helps them. They are keen to get feedback from the teacher and act upon what they are told. But this only works where teachers are able to offer constructive criticism rather than castigating them for being wrong. Giving feedback involves praising students for things they do well, and offering them the ability to do things better where they were less successful. It involves teachers in judging their students' responses to correction so that they can act accordingly.

If these are good learner qualities, then it is part of a teacher's job to encourage them by creating an atmosphere which shows students that their experimentation and questions are welcome (within reason). Teachers can spend some time discussing how to learn with them, guiding them towards their own best methods of study.

What's special about teaching adults?

Perhaps the greatest difference between adults and younger ages is that the former come to lessons with a long history of learning experience. They will usually have gone through at least ten years of schooling and may then have gone on to study at a higher level. Those learning experiences – both bad and good – will have helped them to form strong opinions about how

teaching and learning should be carried out. They also come with their own record of success or failure. Those who underachieved at school may subconsciously assume that they are going to fail again; those who were school successes may believe that learning English will be easy.

Adolescents (and to a lesser extent children) have their own histories too. Each failure predisposes them to more failure, each success provokes the hope of more success. But the younger the student the less likely it is that these educational histories are fixed.

Adults are frequently more nervous of learning than younger pupils are. The potential for losing face becomes greater the older you get. Adolescents dislike being made to look foolish in front of their classmates too, but there are probably other things which make them vulnerable in this way rather than an inability to learn (English). Older students, on the other hand, who are coming back to the classroom after a long absence, may have a high degree of anxiety about the process of learning itself.

One of the recurring nightmares for teachers of adolescents is losing control: the lesson that slips away from them, that they can't control because the students don't like the subject, each other, the teacher or the school – or sometimes just because they feel like it. Adults can be disruptive and exhausting too. They may not do it in the same way as younger learners, but teachers of this age group will have experiences of students who spend the lesson talking to their neighbours when the teacher is trying to focus their attention or who disagree vocally with much of what the teacher is saying. They arrive in class late and fail to do any homework. And, whatever the causes of this behaviour, a problem is created.

Nevertheless, adults as a group have much to recommend them. They bring life experience into the classroom which younger learners do not necessarily have. They may well have a view of the importance of learning which makes them stick to a course of study in a specifically adult way. The attention span that cooperative adults can offer is almost certainly greater than that of children and adolescents. Lastly, teachers of adults are much less likely to have to deal with ongoing daily discipline problems than secondary school teachers are. They can expect more immediate cooperation from the majority of their students.

Whereas in primary schools much learning takes place through play and knowledge gathering is done through games, songs and puzzles, adults, on the other hand, do not necessarily need their learning to be camouflaged, dressed up in quite the same way. If they can see the point of learning – and if we are able to explain the reason why we are asking them to do things to their satisfaction – we do not have to play games or sing songs to get their cooperation.

It is, of course, possible for adults to suffer from boredom in class, especially when they are studying on a full-time course and/or have studied in the same kind of class for a long time. Such people may respond well to lessons that are entertaining and which use enjoyable activities to facilitate language learning. We won't want to treat them like children, but some of them might, nevertheless, respond well to a lighter style of

learning which does, indeed, involve quizzes, puzzles and the study of contemporary songs.

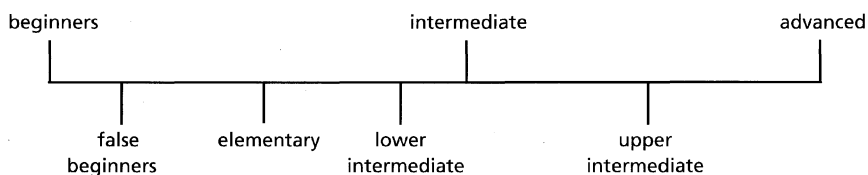
Good teachers are able to balance the serious study of English with the more entertaining activities that they think their students sometimes need. By watching their classes and asking their students what they think and feel, they can select a judicious blend of activity and style.

What are the different levels?

Teachers of English generally make three basic level distinctions: *beginner*, *intermediate* and *advanced* (though exactly what these terms mean often depends where you work and what textbook (if any) you are using). Broadly, however, *beginners* are those who don't know any English and *advanced* students are those whose level of English is competent, allowing them to read unsimplified fact and fiction and communicate fluently with native speakers. Between these two extremes, *intermediate* suggests a basic competence in speaking and writing and an ability to comprehend fairly straightforward listening and reading.

Between these levels, other descriptive terms are used too. A distinction is made between *beginners* and *false beginners* to reflect the fact that some adults start a beginners' course having heard virtually no English, whereas many others can't really use any English but actually know quite a lot which can be quickly activated; they're not real beginners. *Elementary* students are no longer beginners and are able to communicate in a basic way. They can string some sentences together, construct a simple story or take part in predictable spoken interactions. However, they have not yet achieved intermediate competence which involves greater fluency and general comprehension of some general authentic English: there are still areas of knowledge – tense structures, noun phrase construction, vocabulary use etc. – which elementary students have not come across. *Upper intermediate* students, on the other hand, have the competence of intermediate students plus an extended knowledge of grammatical construction and skill use. However, they may not have achieved the accuracy or depth of knowledge which their advanced colleagues have acquired. The following diagram shows the labels which are frequently used to describe different levels.

Although each student is an individual, it is nevertheless possible to make some broad generalisations about the different levels.



Terms for student levels

Beginners: success is easy to see at this level, and easy for the teacher to arrange. But then so is failure! Some adult beginners find that language learning is more stressful than they expected and reluctantly give up. However, if things are going well, teaching beginners can be incredibly stimulating – and great fun. It may be restricting for the teacher, but the pleasure of being able to see your part in your students' success is invigorating.

Intermediate students: success is not so easy to perceive here. Intermediate students have already achieved a lot. Gone are the days when they could observe their progress almost daily. Sometimes, it may seem to them, they don't improve that much or that fast anymore. We often call this the *plateau* effect, and the teacher has to make strenuous attempts to show students what they still need to learn without being discouraging. One of the ways of doing this is to make the tasks we give them more challenging and to get them to analyse language more thoroughly. We need to help them to set clear goals for themselves so that they have something to measure their achievement by.

Advanced students: they already know a lot of English. There is still the danger of the plateau effect (even if the plateau itself is higher up) so we have to create a classroom culture where learning is not seen as learning a language little-bit-by-little-bit. At the advanced level, we need to be able to show students what still has to be done and we need to provide good clear evidence of progress. We can do this through a concentration not so much on grammatical accuracy, but on style and perceptions of appropriacy, connotation and inference, helping students to use language with more subtlety. It is at this level, especially, that we have to encourage students to take more and more responsibility for their own learning.

How should we teach the different levels?

Although many activities can clearly be used at more than one level ('designing' newspaper front pages, writing radio commercials etc.), there are some which are obviously more appropriate for beginners, for example, pronunciation practice of /ə/, simple introduction dialogues, while there are others which are more appropriate for advanced students, such as discursive essay writing or formal debating.

One obvious difference in the way we teach different levels is language. Beginners need to be exposed to fairly simple language which they can understand. In their language work, they may get pleasure (and good learning) from concentrating on straightforward questions like 'What's your name?', 'What's your telephone number?', 'Hello', 'Goodbye' etc. Intermediate students know all this language already and so we will not ask them to concentrate on it.

The level of language also affects the teacher's behaviour. At beginner levels, the need for us to rough-tune our speech is very great: we can exaggerate our voice tone and gesture to help us to get our meaning across. But at higher levels, such extreme behaviour is not so important. Indeed, it will probably come across to the students as patronising.

The activities we offer students often depend on their language level too. For beginners, we will not suggest abstract discussions. For advanced students, a drill (with repetition in chorus) focusing on simple past tense questions will almost certainly be inappropriate. Where a simple role-play with ordinary information questions ('What time does the next train to London leave?', 'What's the platform for the London train?' etc.) may be a good target for beginners to aim at, the focus for advanced students will have to be richer and more subtle, for example, 'What's the best way to persuade someone of your opinion in an argument?', 'How can we structure writing to hold the reader's attention?', 'What different devices do English speakers use to give emphasis to the bits of information they want you to notice?'

Teachers react both overtly and subconsciously to different levels. The material they use – and the activities they get students to engage in – reflect the unique needs of those students at the level they have reached.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have

- looked at what makes a good learner and talked about how learners differ from each other in age and level.
- discussed the issue of motivation – the students' desire to learn. We have said that, even where it isn't present, positive experiences in the classroom may change the students' attitude – for the better.
- stressed that good learners take some of the responsibility for learning themselves. Whilst being sensitive to their own educational and cultural background, we should try and encourage the practice of self-study.
- said that good learners are willing to experiment, listen, ask questions and think about how to learn. This implies the desirability of using appropriate study skills.
- described adult learners. We have said that, like adolescents, they can be disruptive (though in different ways), that they can be quite nervous about learning but that they also have more world knowledge and a greater tolerance for 'serious' learning.
- described some of the different levels which students can reach. We have seen that in the choice of language and activities, what is important is to choose appropriately. What is suitable for beginners may not be so popular for advanced students.

Looking ahead

- In Chapters 6–10, the intended student level (elementary, intermediate, advanced etc.) for each activity will be suggested.
- Chapter 12 on lesson planning will draw together many of the issues about matching activities to the appropriate age group or level made in this chapter.
- However 'good' or 'bad' the students are, the teacher needs to *manage* the classroom, both in terms of his or her own presence and in the way the classroom is physically organised. That is what we look at in the next chapter.