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# THE FORUM

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*TESOL Quarterly* invites commentary on current trends or practices in the TESOL profession. It also welcomes responses or rebuttals to any articles or remarks published here in The Forum or elsewhere in the *Quarterly*.

## *Changing Perspectives on Good Language Learners*

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Language and culture are no longer scripts to be acquired, as much as they are conversations in which people can participate. The question of who is learning what and how much is essentially a question of what conversations they are part of, and this question is a subset of the more powerful question of what conversations are around to be had in a given culture. (McDermott, 1993, p. 295)

■ The notion of *best practices* has been a preoccupation in a variety of professional fields including education, management, business, health care, and social work. In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), interest in discovering and disseminating information about successful activities or practices has had a long history. Carroll (1967) urged investigation of the learning biographies of persons who had been successful in learning more than one language, and Stern (1975), Rubin (1975), and Cohen (1977) all speculated about distinctive learning strategies of good language learners. A particularly influential study on the characteristics and learning strategies of successful language learners,

*The Good Language Learner* (*The GLL*; Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978), was undertaken in the mid-1970s. This study anticipated many of the issues and questions that preoccupied SLA researchers in the 1980s (see, e.g., Ellis, 1986; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Long, 1985; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1989). Indeed, these studies of good language learners provide a window on theories of SLA dominant at the time. This Forum piece, focusing as it does on our more recent research on good language learners, provides an opportunity to assess not only changing conceptions of good language learners but current trends in SLA theory.

We first examine Naiman et al.'s (1978) study as representative of several SLA studies of good language learning. We outline its theoretical foundations and methodological approaches. We then briefly examine more recent sociocultural and poststructural theory, developed mainly but not exclusively within the disciplinary boundaries of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and feminist theory, as relevant to the study of good language learning. We draw on our own more recent research on two good language learners—one adult (Eva) and one child (Julie)—and a comparison of the cases. By focussing on the situated experiences of these two learners, we seek new insights into the dialectic between the individual and the social; between the human agency of these learners and the social practices of their communities.

In seeking such insights, we are not suggesting that earlier researchers were not interested in social context. In much SLA research, as in the good language learner studies, researchers referred to *context*, or the environment of L2 learning, but as Davis (1995) points out was common in work from this perspective, context was seen as at most a modifier of the internal activity that occurred in individual language learners. The questions of interest were how good learners approached language learning tasks differently from poor learners and what characteristics of learners predisposed them to good or poor learning. Further, the work of such sociolinguistic researchers as Wolfson and Judd (1983), for example, was linguistically rather than anthropologically motivated. Hence their linguistic analysis of speech acts such as apologies and compliments, male/female language, and *foreigner talk*. We argue for approaches to good language learning that focus not only on learners' internal characteristics, learning strategies, or linguistic outputs but also on the reception of their actions in particular sociocultural communities.

## **SLA RESEARCH AND GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNING**

*The GLL* (Naiman et al., 1978) appeared at a time when researchers such as Carroll (1967), Rubin (1975), Stern (1975), and Cohen (1977) were calling for research to test the hypothesis that successful learners

were somehow different in constitution from poorer learners and that they engaged in particular facilitating activities while learning languages. Examining the experiences of adults and children defined as good language learners by themselves, by their teachers, or by performance on language proficiency measures, the intent of *The GLL* was to discover if successful learners had particular constellations of personality characteristics, cognitive styles, attitudes, motivations, or past learning experiences that were different from those of less successful learners. In addition to examining characteristics conceptualized as internal to the individual learner, the study's authors were interested in determining learner strategies, techniques, and activities that correlated with success in language learning.

*The GLL* had two parts. The first concerned adults who had learned a variety of languages, and the second concerned Canadian schoolchildren learning French as an L2. The adult subjects' descriptions of their learning activities and experiences were correlated with self-reports of their language learning success. The authors summarized the results of these correlations, noting that adult good language learners appeared to use five significant strategies: (a) taking an active approach to the task of language learning, (b) recognizing and exploiting the systematic nature of language, (c) using the language they were learning for communication and interaction, (d) managing their own affective difficulties with language learning, and (e) monitoring their language learning performance.

The child study component of *The GLL*, which correlated a large number of language proficiency measures with measures of personality, attitude, and cognitive style, confirmed the authors' hypothesis that certain aspects of learner characteristics were more significantly correlated with language learning success than others were. However, the authors also found that the "majority of the cognitive style and personality tests administered did not yield any systematic relationships to the criterion measures [results on the proficiency tests]" (p. 67). Rather than questioning the hypothesis that specific personality and cognitive traits were correlated with achievement, the researchers speculated about the possibility of low construct validity in the tests they used; they concluded that better measures for personality factors needed to be found or constructed. However, the authors found that their study confirmed findings of previous studies that "attitude and motivation were in many instances the best overall predictors of success in second language learning" (p. 66).

Many subsequent SLA studies of adults and children (Bailey, 1983; Bialystok, 1990; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 1989; Gardner, Day, & MacIntyre, 1992; Huang & Hatch, 1978; Saville-Troike, 1988; Strong, 1983; Wong Fillmore, 1979) were conducted on the basis of assumptions that learners had particular cognitive traits,

affective orientations, motivations, past experiences, and other individual characteristics, and that they used particular individual learning strategies, all of which affected their L2 learning. In an early SLA study, for example, Wong Fillmore (1979) suggested the following in the case of a successful child L2 learner: "The secret of Nora's spectacular success as a language learner can be found in the special combination of interests, inclinations, skills, temperament, needs and motivations that comprised her personality" (p. 221).

In sum, as Larsen-Freeman observed in a survey of SLA research in 1991, SLA researchers until then had been preoccupied with discovering the cognitive processes of language acquisition and the effects of learners' characteristics on these processes. L2 learning, from this perspective, was the process by which individual learners (with certain characteristics) internalized language forms in interaction with available L2 input. SLA research was concerned with discovering how these individual learners managed their interactions with L2 input and organized their L2 output. In this way, as Naiman et al. (1978) suggested, language learning was described as mental processes such as "perceiving, analyzing, classifying, relating, storing, retrieving, and constructing a language output" (p. 3). The situated experience of learners was not a focus of such research. To investigate such experience, we draw on more recent theory and research.

## **CONVERSATIONS, COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE, AND LEARNER IDENTITIES**

Since 1978, when *The GLL* was published, interest in sociological and anthropological aspects of SLA has been increasing, especially in terms of sociocultural, poststructural, and critical theory (Auerbach, 1997; Hall, 1993, 1995; Kramsch, 1993; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995; Pennycook, 1990; Rampton, 1995). There has been similar interest in applying the research methodologies of the social sciences to L2 research (Davis, 1995; Hornberger & Corson, 1997; Lazaraton, 1995; Watson-Gegeo, 1988, 1992). This recent literature has been concerned not only with studying individuals acting on L2 input and producing L2 output, but also with studying how L2 learners are situated in specific social, historical, and cultural contexts and how learners resist or accept the positions those contexts offer them.

Drawing on our own research (Norton, 2000; Toohey, 2000), we approach the explanation of the success of good language learners on the basis of their access to a variety of conversations in their communities rather than on the basis of their control of a wider variety of linguistic forms or meaning than their peers or on the basis of their speed of acquisition of linguistic forms and meanings. We have been guided in

this endeavor by sociocultural perspectives on L2 learning that have become of increasing interest in L2 educational research since the mid-1990s (e.g., Day, 1999; Donato & McCormick, 1994; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Dunn & Lantolf, 1996; Gutierrez, 1993; Hall, 1993, 1995; Haneda, 1997; Hunter, 1997; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lin, 1996; McGroarty, 1998; Toohey, 1998, 2000; Willett, 1995). This approach, based on what is variously termed situated *cognition* or *sociocultural, sociohistorical, or cultural-historical theory*, aims to “reflect the fundamentally social nature of learning and cognition” (Kirshner & Whitson, 1997, p. 1). In this view, the focus on individuals and their functioning (characteristic of much psychological SLA research) needs to shift to activities and settings and the learning that inevitably accompanies social practice. This work typically draws on the work of L. S. Vygotsky and M. M. Bakhtin as well as that of other contemporary theorists in a variety of fields (e.g., Cole, 1996, 1998; Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Goodwin, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ochs, 1988; Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996; Wertsch, 1991, 1998).

Vygotsky (1978) is often seen as providing the basis for sociocultural approaches to learning with his emphasis on the importance of social contexts in processes of acculturation, whereby more experienced participants in a culture bring the “intellectual tools of society” (Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry, & Göncü, 1993, p. 232) within the reach of less experienced members. Examining the relevance of Vygotsky’s ideas to language learning, Hall (1993) notes, “The ability to participate as a competent member in the practices of a group is learned through repeated engagement in and experience with these activities with more competent members of a group” (p. 148). This approach stresses practice and the presence of coparticipants more experienced in the activities. This focus on the social nature of learning is paralleled in Bakhtin’s work on the social nature of language. Bakhtin (1981) sees speakers learning to speak by taking utterances from “other people’s mouths” and “other people’s intentions” (p. 294). For him, speakers try on other people’s utterances; they take words from other people’s mouths; they appropriate those utterances, and gradually those utterances come to serve their needs and relay their meanings. As people initially appropriate the utterances of others and bend those utterances to their own intentions, they enter the communicative chain and become able to fashion their own voices.

Fundamental to a sociocultural approach, then, is the assumption that “learning and development occur as people participate in the sociocultural activities of their community” (Rogoff, 1994, p. 209). From this perspective, learners of English participate in particular, local contexts in which specific practices create possibilities for them to learn English. Lave and Wenger (1991) propose the notion of *community of practice* (“a

set of relations among persons, activity and world,” p. 98) as a way to theorize and investigate social contexts. Social contexts from their perspective might be viewed as complex and overlapping communities in which variously positioned participants learn specific, local, historically constructed, and changing practices. This view shifts attention away from questions about, for example, the personality traits or learning styles of participants to questions about how community organization provides positions for participants’ engagement in community practices. From this perspective, L2 learning is not seen so much as a gradual and neutral process of internalizing the rules, structures, and vocabulary of a standard language; rather, learners are seen to appropriate the utterances of others in particular historical and cultural practices, situated in particular communities. Thus, researchers need to pay close attention to how communities and their practices are structured in order to examine how this structuring facilitates or constrains learners’ access to the linguistic resources of their communities.

A focus on the learning context, however, needs to be complemented with a focus on the identity and human agency of the language learner. Whereas previous research viewed good language learners as gradually developing appropriate strategies for interaction in their respective linguistic communities by, for example, monitoring their performance more diligently and exploiting the target language more systematically, recent research on identity and language learning demonstrates that the process may be far more complex (see Angélil-Carter, 1997; Goldstein, 1996; Harklau, 2000; McKay & Wong, 1996; Morgan, 1998; Norton, 1997, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995; Siegal, 1996; Stein, 1998). These scholars note that the conditions under which language learners speak are often highly challenging, engaging their identities in complex and often contradictory ways. Researchers have focussed, in particular, on the often unequal relations of power between language learners and target language speakers, arguing that SLA theory has not given sufficient attention to the effects of power on social interaction. The notion of *investment* (Angélil-Carter, 1997; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton Peirce, 1995) has been helpful in signalling the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. Extending the existing notion of motivation’s role in SLA, these researchers have argued that when learners invest in an L2, they do so anticipating that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn enhance their conception of themselves and their desires for the future. Such desires are a complex configuration of memories and hopes, many of which may be scarcely articulated. Research on identity and language learning has been influenced by the work of such scholars as Bourdieu (1977, 1984) and Weedon (1987), among others.

## IDENTIFYING TWO “GOOD” LANGUAGE LEARNERS

We now examine aspects of studies we independently conducted with cohorts of language learners in the 1990s (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995; Toohey, 1996, 1998, 2000). Norton’s work was with adults; Toohey’s, with children. Both studies were qualitative and used a variety of data-gathering techniques: journals and interviews (in the adult study) and participant observation, interviews, and videotaping (in the child study). Both involved data gathering in multiple sites over significant periods of time—1 year in the adult study and 3 years in the child study. Both employed critical research methods in interpreting their data. In both cases, we were less interested in the internal characteristics of the learners than in the characteristics of their social interactions as well as the practices in the communities in which they were learning English.

In the adult study (Norton, 2000), conducted with five immigrant women in Canada, one language learner, Eva, a young Polish woman, could be considered more successful than the others. During the course of the study, the five learners were assessed by means of a cloze passage, dictation, dialogue, crossword, short essay, and oral interview. Although each of the learners had arrived in Canada with little experience speaking English, Eva’s performance on these measures was outstanding relative to that of the other learners. In terms of her knowledge of particular language forms, she was unequivocally a good language learner. What is perplexing, however, is that all five learners could be considered good language learners in terms of the strategies identified in *The GLL*. Each of them took an active approach to the task of language learning; they all recognized and exploited the systematicity of language; they used their language for communication and interaction; they managed their affective difficulties with language learning; and they all monitored their language learning performance. How was it, then, that Eva had proved particularly effective as a language learner? She lived in a neighborhood in which little English was spoken, and her partner, Janus, was Polish. One clue to the answer to this question, we believe, lies in the extent to which Eva was able to negotiate entry into the anglophone social networks in her workplace, Munchies, despite initial difficulties.

The second learner to be considered is Julie, who was at the time reported here the 5-year-old child of Polish-speaking immigrant parents. Julie had not attended an English preschool program, but she and her younger sister had attended a Polish-medium Sunday school since they were quite young. Julie (as well as five other children of minority language backgrounds) was observed in a public school over the course of 3 years from the beginning of kindergarten to the end of Grade 2, for a study aimed at discovering how these children came to be participants

in school activities (Toohey, 2000). Julie was initially identified as an ESL learner on the basis of an interview with her kindergarten teacher before school entrance, and she subsequently attended a supplementary afternoon ESL kindergarten with ESL children from other classes. By the end of kindergarten, her teacher assessed her as being enough like (in the teacher's words) a "normal" (i.e., English-speaking) child linguistically and academically that she would have a good year in Grade 1; the teacher also predicted that Julie would not require any special assistance with ESL. In view of her mother's opinion that Julie started school speaking Polish appropriately for her age but that she knew only "a few words [of English] . . . not much," her progress seemed extraordinary. No formal English proficiency tests were administered to the children by the school or as part of the study described here, but Julie's teacher's assessment of her as academically and linguistically able, and the evidence that she participated in a wide variety of classroom interactions, are the basis for the selection her experience as a relevant case of good language learning. Psychologically derived models might hypothesize that Julie had particular cognitive traits, motivations, and strategies that led to her success in language learning. Like Eva's, however, Julie's success evidently was at least partially determined by the structure and characteristics of the practices in her classroom and the social relationships permitted and negotiated therein.

## **PRACTICES AND AGENCY IN DIVERSE SETTINGS**

With reference to the good language learners in our respective studies, we draw on social, anthropological, and critical theory to approach two central questions: (a) How did the practices in the environments of these good language learners constrain or facilitate their access to English, and (b) how did these good language learners gain access to the social networks of their communities? We see these questions as a dialectic between the constraints and possibilities offered by the learners' environments and their agency as learners.

### **Community Practices**

With respect to the first question, we need to examine how language, work, and schooling practices were structured. Munchies, a fast-food restaurant, was a workplace that had differentiated practices for workers, and lengthy conversations between coworkers or between workers and customers were unusual (except at the tea-time breaks, when coworkers would chat with one another). Workers needed to satisfy customers' requests as expeditiously and efficiently as possible, and even servers, who were encouraged to communicate politely, engaged in only brief



exchanges. Some tasks, like cleaning the floors or emptying garbage, were solitary and required little or no language. The desirability of jobs in the restaurant (not only for an English language learner like Eva) were in direct relationship to the level of interaction they necessitated, and those people who performed solitary jobs were considered less desirable than other workers. Cleaning the floors, unfortunately, was seen as a suitable job for an immigrant, a newcomer, and an English language learner. Eva's positioning in these tasks blocked her access to conversations with her coworkers and limited her opportunities to engage in community practices like talking while working. Eva did have access to tea-time conversations, but they were not very lengthy, and they required expertise at linguistic practices that Eva, as a relatively inexperienced speaker of English, did not have. If Eva's English proficiency had been tested at this point, when her workplace community had blocked her access to practice with more experienced participants, she might not have appeared a good language learner.

However, the workplace community of practice overlapped with another community of practice, the social contacts in which workers participated outside work. It was company policy at Munchies that the management would help sponsor a monthly outing for employees. At these times Eva was taken outside the workplace, where she had been positioned as a "stupid" person, only worthy of the "worst kind of job," as she put it, to a context in which her youth and charm were valued symbolic resources. On these occasions Eva's partner would help provide transportation for her fellow employees. Outside the institutional constraints of the workplace, where the nature of the work undertaken by Munchies employees structured to a large extent the social relations of power in the workplace, a different set of relationships began to develop. Eva's identity in the eyes of her coworkers became more complex, and their relationship to her began to change. As Eva explained,

For example yesterday when we went out, the manager she said to me—because I am just one year younger than she—"You look really different when you are not at work." Because when I am at the work I—when I do the hard job—I don't know, I'm different than like here.

Her subsequent reassignment to other jobs in the restaurant allowed her to speak, and to speak from a more desirable position. In this case, therefore, whereas some workplace practices constrained her access to and participation in speaking English, others permitted her access; in time, space was made for her to participate more actively in the social and verbal activities of her community.

Practices in workplaces, linguistic and otherwise, are different from practices in schools, where talk is often seen to be integral to the job of

classroom learning. Julie's kindergarten teacher encouraged the children to talk, share ideas, listen to stories, and give opinions, and play was an explicit component of the curriculum. At Circle Time, the teacher asked children to participate in choral activities to whatever extent they wished, and their participation there was heavily scaffolded by their teacher and the other children. Solo contributions at Circle Time were also scaffolded by their teacher. In play, children were together, and they might or might not speak to one another while manipulating classroom material resources. Few activities in the kindergarten were solitary, and language did not seem to be the most important mediator of social activity. This is not to say that all children had easy access to peers, play, and play resources; at times some children were forcefully excluded from these, and exclusion was as clearly much a classroom practice as scaffolded inclusion was. However, Julie was rarely excluded by other children, and she had allies, both child and adult, who protected her right to participate. The practices of Julie's kindergarten classroom aided her in participating more and more actively in the social and verbal activities of the community.

The contrasting practices of Eva's and Julie's communities explain, in part, why Eva's route to participation seemed more fraught with difficulty than Julie's. Although both Eva and Julie were accountable to more experienced members of their institutional hierarchies, in the form of the manager and the teacher, respectively, Eva's relationship to her manager was very different from Julie's relationship to her teacher. Eva's boss did not consider the development of Eva's communication skills as an institutional responsibility. Although the boss may have sought to make better use of Eva's improving communication skills, the responsibility was on Eva to demonstrate that she was sufficiently competent to undertake linguistically challenging tasks. In Julie's case, in contrast, the teacher saw it as her responsibility to help Julie and the other English learners improve their English skills; she provided much scaffolding in the learning process and gave these children many opportunities to talk. Further, although Eva's boss was centrally concerned with Eva's productivity as a worker, the teacher had multidimensional expectations of Julie as a student. She was interested not only in learning outcomes but in Julie's behaviour in class and her relationship with peers. Whereas Eva struggled to be given more desirable jobs in the restaurant, jobs that required the newly acquired skill of using English, in which she was heard to be deficient, Julie's participation in English language activities was encouraged and scaffolded.

## Human Agency

Our second question concerns how these language learners—ultimately good learners—exercised human agency to gain access to the social networks of their communities. Both learners were exposed to English in an institutional context in which English was the major means of communication. Eva was the only Polish speaker in her workplace, and Julie’s kindergarten classroom, though enrolling children of diverse language backgrounds, included only two other speakers of Polish, both boys, with whom Julie seldom interacted. For Eva and Julie, access to peers was important not only for language learning but for social affiliation. What is remarkable in both cases is that even though attempts were made to subordinate or isolate the learners, both made effective use of a variety of resources to gain access to their peer networks. Two such resources can be described as intellectual and social, respectively.

With regard to intellectual resources, Eva, for example, drew on her knowledge of Italian as well as her knowledge of other countries to contribute to conversations with her peers. One of her coworkers who had an Italian husband was very happy to learn some basic Italian from Eva, and other coworkers were impressed by her knowledge of European countries—which are considered desirable travel destinations in Canada. In a very different context, Julie also sometimes tried to teach Polish to peers, and the data illustrate how she used her access to proprietary information (*secrets*) to resist subordination and to position herself as a desirable playmate with access to valued information. Julie also knew, in effect, *school secrets*: Her participation in Polish Sunday school for several years had made her familiar with classroom routines, materials, and expected demeanor. In both Eva’s and Julie’s cases, the reception for their intellectual offerings was positive. Although both exerted agency in making these offerings, the others in their social context determined the worth of their contributions. Again, an interaction between the agency of the learners and the social frameworks in which they exercised that agency is evident.

With regard to social resources, both Eva and Julie had community or extracommunity allies to position themselves more favorably within their peer networks. On management outings, Eva’s partner not only provided rides for her coworkers but helped position Eva as someone in a desirable relationship. Julie developed both adult and child allies at school, most noteworthy of which was her cousin Agatha, an experienced speaker of English and Polish. Such relationships served to place Eva and Julie in more powerful positions with respect to their peers, enhancing their opportunities to participate in the conversations around them. Had Eva’s boyfriend or Julie’s allies not been seen as desirable, Eva and Julie

might not have been able to negotiate more desirable places for themselves and more opportunities for verbal and social interaction.

Past approaches to explaining good language learners might assume that Eva and Julie had gradually developed appropriate strategies for interaction in their respective linguistic communities by, for example, monitoring their performance more diligently and exploiting the target language more systematically. Our research paints a far more complex picture, however. Rather than focussing on language structures per se, both learners sought to set up counterdiscourses in which their identities could be respected and their resources valued, thereby enhancing the possibilities for shared conversation. Eva, initially constructed as an *ESL immigrant*, sought to reposition herself as a *multilingual resource* with a desirable partner; Julie, initially constructed as an *ESL learner*, came to be seen as a *nice little girl* with allies. Their success in claiming more powerful identities seems important to their success as good language learners. This is not to say that proficiency in English was irrelevant in the process of accessing peer networks, particularly in Eva's case, but rather that struggles over identity were central.

## CONCLUSION

In this commentary we have argued that the proficiencies of the good language learners in our studies were bound up not only in what they did individually but also in the possibilities their various communities offered them. Our research and recent theoretical discussions have convinced us that understanding good language learning requires attention to social practices in the contexts in which individuals learn L2s. As well, we have argued for the importance of examining the ways in which learners exercise their agency in forming and reforming their identities in those contexts. We see this dual focus as necessary to understand good language learning and as an important complement to earlier studies.

We conclude with a comment on the way conceptions of good language learners and SLA theory may evolve in the future. We believe it is significant that both Eva and Julie were able to access the social networks in their respective learning communities, albeit at different rates. We wonder what data we would have collected had Eva and Julie not been blonde and white-skinned, slim, able-bodied, well dressed, and attractive to Western eyes. In this regard, although Eva's coworkers were ultimately happy to work with her, they remained reluctant to work with other immigrants. And in the classroom, a South Asian girl was not as successful as Julie in resisting subordination. We hope that future research may lend important insight to issues of race, the body, and (good) language learning.

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