

FL 598 Foreign Language Teaching Methods • Winter 2004

Writing Task: Characteristics of Good Language Learners and Good Language Learning – A Guide for Students

Due: Thursday, 26 February, with the usual small incentive for turning it in ahead of the deadline for advance review and consultation.

Introduction

Major topics these last few weeks have been learner characteristics and expectations, theories about the way in which people learn languages, proficiency assessment according to ACTFL guidelines, and (some) aspects of teaching that influence learning. Your task is to use your knowledge to write something about language learning that would be useful to someone with less language learning experience and knowledge than yourself. Reflect on what you believe to be the characteristics of a good language learner, taking into consideration what we have learned about learning styles and strategies, major language learning theories, what you know about our clients, and other information you have discovered thus far in the course.

The assignment is intended to have the educational effect of a mid-term examination, but also to be actually useful to real learners. It can also go into your teacher portfolio as a picture of your current view of language learning.

Situation and procedure

Your language program is aligning its curriculum and methods to the communicative approach and to K-16 standards. You have been asked to create a “Guide for Language Learners” so that they can better understand how people learn in general, the many ways in which various people can learn, how people learn languages for proficiency, and the

major features of good language learning and good language learners.

You are writing a LEARNING guide, not a study guide. Later other teams who have worked on special topics will write about why the teachers teach the way they do and why the materials, assignments and tests are the way they are, while still other groups will create the pieces about “How to read for proficiency,” etc.

Parameters

The nature of the task dictates its parameters. Your “Guide” will have to be several pages long to cover its topic at all adequately, but it can’t be longer than that, because few ordinary learners will read it then. The concepts you present, and the language you use to express them, must be suitable to your learners. It is unlikely that you can use specialized terms without some explanation, and you have only so much space for your writing.

Remember that even intelligent people who are entering new territory can become confused very easily, and that they often bring incorrect assumptions with them. You are writing NOT for professors, but for your learners. Take into account their age, language level, background. Most likely your readers have a vague or distorted notion of language learning, and they cannot be expected to understand the terminology used in a graduate-level language teacher methods course. You may find it helpful (to them, especially) to use some striking comparisons and images, such as “The best language learning occurs when we encourage the mind to work like a sponge, not like a bucket or a blank piece of paper.”

Boundaries & Limits

About length, format and medium: MLA standards are NOT always appropriate for all academic writing. It is highly unlikely that an actual “Guide for Language Learners” would be published double-spaced on 8.5 x 11-inch paper with only one column. But if you choose to follow MLA about basic text format, then the length specification is 4-5 pages double-spaced. If you have the word-processing skills to produce a document that looks like finished text, that’s all right too. Another format for “publication,” of course, would be web-page style. “Hard copy” is OK, but electronic text is even nicer – the best “Guides” will (or would) be suitable for actual publication for students. Aim for 1000 words.

It will likely help you save labor and length to remember that you are writing about LANGUAGE learning, not just a specific language, not about learning in general, and not about discipline. Other specialists in your program will write the generic learning materials and will deal with classroom management, etc., and tips about learning the specific language will go in the main section of instructional materials. So don't waste time and space in your “Guide” telling the learners that they need to come to class on time, pay attention, etc., and don't get into the details of learning your specific language of interest.

The research suggests that learning about learning is better expressed in the learner's native language, not the target language. There are some circumstances where that may not be so, or even may not be possible, such as an advanced course where the students do not share one native language. If your native language is French, German or Spanish, you may write your “manual” in one of those languages, but be very careful to write so that your intended readers can easily understand you. If you choose to

write other than in English, you should picture your learners as, for example, second-year college language students. It is almost impossible to write a “Guide” for beginners, except in their native language, although a really insightful and imaginative teacher, with plenty of production resources, might find a great way, other than writing, to convey the characteristics of good learning and good learners. But maybe that project should be saved for a later grant proposal.

At this point in the course some of you have realized that you are free to use almost any resources you can find, including other people, because that is what professional language teachers so often do. Among other resources to consider are, of course, language-teaching journals and your “core” book, but also the support materials for teachers and students that come with language textbooks, and also the materials that are used to advertise textbooks, whether in journals or on publishers’ websites.

Note: Somewhere in your task, briefly describe your audience, so that we can evaluate the appropriateness of your expository technique; for example: “average high-school sophomores.”