

A Step to Facilitating Learning ---- Learning Strategies Instruction

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Received: October 8, 2011

Accepted: December 21, 2011

Published: February 1, 2012

doi:10.5539/ijel.v2n1p55

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v2n1p55>

Abstract

To help students to become resourceful, effective, and efficient learners, teachers in ELT course should go beyond their traditional role of knowledge provider. They need to equip students through instruction with appropriate learning strategies. The meta-cognitive strategies and cognitive strategies will allow students to take more responsibility for their own learning by enhancing their efficiency, autonomy, independence, and self-direction.

Keywords: English learning, Meta-cognitive strategy, Cognitive strategy

1. Instruction

Studies in the area of learning strategies show that learning strategies facilitate learning and through classroom instruction enable students to learn more efficiently (Rigney, 1978; Bialystok, 1979; Brow, 1982; O'Malley, et al.1983; Oxford,1989; Nyikos & Oxford,1993; and Hashim & Sahil, 1994). Learning strategies can help learners to assimilate new information into their existing schemata, which then enrich it to more complex schemata (Slobin, 1971; Anderson, 1980; Carrell, 1984).

In order to help students to become resourceful, effective, and efficient learners, teacher in ELT course should go beyond their traditional role of knowledge provider. They need to equip students through instruction with appropriate learning strategies. Once learned, these strategies can be transferred to other learning situations, where similar skills are required. The learning strategies will allow students to take more responsibility for their own learning by enhancing their efficiency, autonomy, independence, and self-direction.

2. Potential of Learning Strategies

“Learning strategies are behaviors or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable” (Oxford, 1989:235).

Learning strategies may describe either meta-cognitive or cognitive activities. Meta-cognitive strategies, as described by O'Malley & Chamol (1990: 230-231), are “the learning strategies that involve thinking about or knowledge of the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring learning while it is taking place, or self-evaluation of learning after the task has been completed”. Cognitive strategies, which involve manipulation or transformation of materials or tasks, are often specific to distinct learning activities and are intended to enhance comprehension, acquisition, or retention (Rigney, 1978; Brown, 1982; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Learning strategies have considerable potential for enhancing the development of linguistic skills in English as a foreign language. “Learning strategies can help students transform comprehensible input (what the teacher provides) into comprehensible intake (what the students actually takes in and stores in a manner that allows for retrieval of the learned information in future situation)” (Nyikos & Oxford, 1993:12). The learning strategies are applicable to a variety of language tasks (Bialystok, 1979; O'Malley et al, 1983). Learning strategies for the most part are relatively easy to use and have the potential to be taught with positive effects to learners unacquainted with their applications (Rubin & Thompson, 1982). The findings reported by Hashim & Sahil (1994) suggest that it is important to incorporate language learning strategies into language course in order to provide learners with greater opportunity to make language learning an autonomous process. The ESL training study, conducted by O'Malley et al, (1985), demonstrated that learning strategies instruction can be effectively implemented in real classroom settings.

3. Teaching and Learning in Chinese Context

China cherishes its education. China's Confucian education system (Confucius, one of the greatest thinkers in ancient China, who laid the philosophical foundation for education in China) emphasizes teaching by strict model. Teachers are expected to be the model for people to follow. Teaching is viewed in China as a 'sacred' occupation. Throughout the country, teachers are respected and regarded as authorities in the classroom. Teachers are believed to be the authoritative source of knowledge. They are, therefore, obliged to impart knowledge to their students. As an authority in the classroom, teacher tells students what he thinks they ought to learn.

Students, on the other hand, see themselves as apprentice: their study is strongly based on the imitation of the teacher as "master" or "model". From childhood they have got used to learning things from the teacher and expecting him to do his job of clearing up all the perplexities in addition to passing on information. Because a long term tradition in Chinese pedagogy requires students to commit large amounts of information and "text" to memory, they have to internalize knowledge through close attention and mimicry-memorization. Since students have got accustomed to spoon-feeding method, even at tertiary level they still expect the teacher to structure the learning situation for them, telling them what to learn and how to learn.

Since many students believe that they can learn everything they want from the teacher, they, therefore, lack the initiative to seek their own learning strategies. Another belief that restricts their range of learning strategies is that proficiency can be attained solely through such traditional means as grammar translation, and rote learning.

4. Necessity of Learning Strategies and Suggested Learning Strategies for Instruction

The purpose of teaching is to induce learning, essential to which is the learner. The nature of learning, in turn, requires the learner's involvement in the learning process. Learning is facilitated when student participates responsibly in the learning process. "Learning will not happen when the teacher insists on teaching rather than letting the students learn for themselves. Nor will it happen when the students do not know how to learn for themselves, even though the teacher has relinquished his sole agent's right of dealing with the language." (Li,1985:58)

To get students actively involved in the learning process, they need to be equipped with the tools to cope with language learning. Helping students develop learning strategies is a major step towards helping them involved in the learning process. To enable them to do so, it is necessary to help them master appropriate learning strategies.

Rather than assuming that students will develop appropriate learning strategies on their own, instruction on learning strategies should become part of regular language teaching process in ELT course.

Based on their research findings reported by O'Malley & Chamot(1990) on learning strategies, a number of learning strategies, presumably relevant to ELT course in Chinese context, are suggested for Chinese teachers of English. They may integrate instruction on the use of these suggested learning strategies with appropriate language task.

4.1 *Meta-cognitive Strategies*

4.1.1 Advance Organization

It requires students to preview the main idea and concepts of the material to be learned. But many students are used to punctuating even their first-time reading of the to-be-learned text with excursions to the dictionary. They should be taught to overcome the habit of going directly to the dictionary upon encountering an unknown item. Instead, they should be encouraged to identify the main ideas and concepts of the text by skim-reading first.

4.1.2 Selective Attention

It requires students to decide in advance to attend to specific aspects of language input or situation details that assist in performance of a task. In this view, students should be taught to learn how to locate in advance key words, concepts, and linguistic points in a new text that are to be the focus of an upcoming language task.

4.1.3 Self-Monitoring

Both language learners and native speakers typically try to correct any errors in what they have just said. This is referred as "monitoring". The learner can monitor vocabulary, grammar, phonology, or discourse. By self-monitoring students should be taught to learn to check their comprehension during reading and the accuracy and appropriateness of their oral or written production.

4.1.4 Problem Identification

Ask students in the class or assign them after the class to explicitly identify the ongoing/prior language task

related problems that hinder understanding and need resolution.

4.2 Cognitive Strategies

4.2.1 Resourcing

Rather than resorting to pocket English-Chinese dictionary, Chinese versions of the text, and answer key, students should be encouraged to use available reference source of information about the target language, including monolingual, bilingual dictionaries, encyclopedia, related prior work, and relevant supplementary materials.

4.2.2 Grouping

First teach students how to classify words, terminology, or concepts dealt with in the previous texts according to their attributes or meaning, then encourage students to do the classifying for the new text on their own.

4.2.3 Deduction/Induction

By definition it means to consciously apply those learned or self-developed rules to produce or understand the target language. In vocabulary, for instance, teacher may elicit from students application of grammatical rules to identify the forms of unknown words of the text, which leads to guesses about the type of words it would be.

4.2.4 Elaboration

Elaboration refers to the mental process of relating new knowledge to existing information in long-term memory. It has also been described as a process of making meaningful connection between different parts of new textual information. In light of it, teacher may point out what students have already learned and suggest how they can use this linguistic or world knowledge to an intelligent inference about the meaning of an unknown item. In reading comprehension, for instance, teacher may encourage students' use of prior knowledge, both academic and real world to make decisions about probable meaning.

4.3 Transfer

Teach students to learn to use previously acquired linguistic knowledge or prior skills to facilitate the understanding or production of the present language task.

4.4 Summarizing

Teach students to learn to use previously acquired linguistic knowledge or prior skills to facilitate the understanding or production of the present language task.

4.5 Inferencing

“Help student develop strategies and knowledge to use internal and external contexts to infer meaning is a major step towards helping them become independent learners.” (Kang & Golden, 1994:57). Students should be taught to learn to use available information to guess the meanings or usage of unfamiliar language items associated with a language task, to predict outcome, or to fill in missing information.

Learning strategies instruction can be integrated into regular teaching process in order to demonstrate to the students the specific application of the strategies and promote the transfer of the strategies to new task.

Students should be in advance apprised of the goals of strategies instruction and should be made aware of the strategies being presented. This meta-cognitive knowledge will facilitate transfer of the strategies to new tasks.

5. Conclusion

Language learning strategies facilitate learning. Instruction in the use of appropriate learning strategies is needed for the language learning process to be effective. Through instruction, learning strategies will enable students to learn the target language more efficiently, and to be able, eventually, to manage their own learning.

Class instruction on learning strategies can help students gain awareness of learning strategies. “The greater the strategy awareness of learners, the more likely they will be to use task-appropriate learning strategies that help them overcome their general learning style limitations, and the more likely that these strategies will assist in processing, retrieving, and using new language information” (Nyikos & Oxford, 1993).

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