

Teaching Language-Learning Strategies

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Introduction

Learning strategies, considered inherent to the act of learning, are what students do when trying to learn and address their learning problems. Research over the past thirty years increasingly confirms that helping language learners to use learning strategies effectively results in increased language proficiency and learner motivation (see Hassan et al., 2005, for the best review of this topic). Continuing investigation has outlined effective instructional strategies for promoting learning of these strategies (Brown & Palincsar, 1982; Coyle, 2007; Graham & Macaro, 2007, 2008; Harris, 2007). In addition, language teacher educators are now identifying the most effective practices to develop teachers' ability to incorporate learner strategies into their language curriculum.

Types of Learning Strategies and the Learner Self-Management Model

More than three decades of research has led to the identification of specific learning strategies adopted by language learners of a range of ages and learning styles (both expert and novice) studying a variety of languages. Several kinds of strategies have been identified: cognitive, metacognitive, and socioaffective. Research (Chamot, 2005; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010) has determined that successful language learners control their learning by using metacognitive strategies (i.e., thinking about learning) and making decisions about what to do.

To understand the relationship among these different strategies Rubin (2005) proposed the learner self-management model, based on Butler's (1997) discussion of learner self-regulation as "The ability to deploy procedures and to access knowledge and beliefs in order to accomplish learning goals in a *dynamically* changing environment" (p. 37, italics in the original). Rubin defines *procedures* as the actions learners take to manage their learning by planning (e.g., setting goals, criteria/evidence, a time line; task analysis; creating an action plan), monitoring/noticing, evaluating, problem solving, and implementing problem solutions. Task analysis consists of task purpose (why you want to reach your goal), task classification (what you know about the task) and task demands (how to proceed based on your task classification). Rubin observed that in order to select appropriate cognitive and socioaffective strategies, learners need to base the selection on their task classification.

Adapting Wenden's (1995) definition, Rubin (2005) further defined *knowledge and beliefs* as: task knowledge, person knowledge, strategy knowledge, background knowledge, and beliefs. She then underlined the critical interaction between procedures (strategies to manage learning) and knowledge (information needed for learners to manage their learning).

Cohen (1998, cited in Manchón, 2008, p. 4) provides the most consistent rationale for teaching learning strategies.

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The strategy training movement is predicated on the assumption that if learners are conscious about and become responsible for the selection, use, and evaluation of their learning strategies, they will become more successful language learners . . . In other words, the ultimate goal of strategy training is to empower students by allowing them to take control of the learning process.

Learning involves getting, storing, retrieving, and using information. As such, many cognitive learning strategies are similar to processes identified by other second language acquisition researchers: awareness, attention, hypothesis formation and testing, and practicing. Memory plays a critical role in storing and retrieving; a range of memory strategies can enhance this process. Motivation (Dörnyei, 2001) has been identified as another critical element in the learning process. Pintrich (1999) defined three aspects of motivation: self-efficacy (the belief in one's ability to accomplish tasks), task value (the belief that the task is worth doing), and goal orientation toward learning. If learners are able to manage their learning, greater self-efficacy results.

Characteristics of Learning Strategy Instruction

According to Macaro (2001), "Strategy training is a gradual, recursive, and longitudinal process" (p. 266). Consequently, those interested in promoting strategy instruction should not expect a quick fix, but rather an organized, well-informed endeavor to help learners move toward the goal of self-management. Other important characteristics of learning strategy instruction include that it be contextualized, scaffolded, explicit, with choice, with control, and relevant.

Contextualization

Contextualization means that strategies are taught as part of a language lesson, since the purpose of teaching learning strategies is to enable learners to more easily attain a specific learning goal and accomplish a task. Hence, it is neither effective nor efficient to teach strategies in the absence of goals. The teaching of self-management (including the knowledge needed to use procedures) and the product (i.e., the language) must be integrated since both are interconnected aspects of learning.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is another critical element in teaching learning strategies. It involves the teacher providing just the right amount of support to enable learners to progress. As learners gain control of their use of strategies, teachers can fade the scaffolding and shift more responsibility for learning to the students. Examples of scaffolding include modeling strategy use, explaining what, why, when, and how a strategy can be used, and providing examples. Fading includes providing just a hint or a prompt. The advantage of scaffolding is that it can be individualized and given "just in time," leading to less learner frustration.

Explicitness

In a classic study, Brown and Palincsar (1982) provided three types of instruction: blind, informed, and controlled. In the blind mode, learners were given an exercise without any explanation of how to perform it; in the informed mode, learners were presented with a strategy, its name, and why it was useful; and in the controlled mode, learners were not only told the name of the strategy and why it was useful but also when it might not be useful. The study found that informed learners outperformed blind learners, and controlled learners did best, illustrating the importance of explicit strategy instruction.

Choice

An important factor in motivating learners and developing their ability to self-manage is giving learners choices about the materials they use to practice, the goals they set for themselves (i.e., what to focus on), their purpose in doing a task (i.e., why they want to focus on a goal), and how they want to go about working on a task. Chamot and Genovese (2009) found that giving students choice of materials increased their motivation.

Control

Strengthening learners' control over their learning is the ultimate goal of strategy instruction. Such instruction includes development of procedures along with enhancing knowledge and clarification of beliefs. Pintrich (2000, cited in Manchón, 2008) observed that it is especially important for learners to set their own goals if they are to achieve control of their learning. Rubin (2005) added that not only do they need to set their own goals but also to establish criteria (i.e., observable evidence) for determining whether they have reached their goals and to do task analysis for selection of appropriate strategies. However, consistent with Macaro's (2001) observation about the amount of time strategy instruction takes, Rubin and McCoy (2008) found that multiple practice opportunities are needed for learners to be able to establish criteria consistently.

Relevance

Strategy instruction should be directly related to the problems that learners are seeking to solve. Unless strategy instruction is used to solve specific learning problems, learners will regard it as an additional burden and simply superfluous.

Instructional Sequences

Although there are a number of models for teaching learning strategies (White, Schramm, & Chamot, 2007, p. 112; see also Rubin, Chamot, Harris, & Anderson, 2007, p. 142), common to all these models is a sequence of four steps: (a) *preparation*: teachers raise learner awareness of problems and strategies; (b) *presentation*: teacher models, names, and explains new strategy, suggesting possible benefits—this can help students become more aware of the thinking and learning process; (c) *practice*: teacher provides multiple practice opportunities to help students move toward autonomous use of the strategies through gradual withdrawal of the scaffolding, eventually enabling transfer of strategies to fresh tasks; and (d) *evaluation*: learners use criteria to evaluate effectiveness of strategies and determine whether they addressed their problem (and, if they did not, to consider what other strategies to use).

Regarding the first step of "preparation," Rubin et al. (2007) provide a comparison of several awareness-raising techniques: questionnaires, focus groups, journals, asking a specific question, and reading about the learning process. An additional awareness-raising technique is cold practice followed by a discussion of strategies used and how effective they were. In terms of the second step of "presentation," one of the most effective techniques for modeling is to "think aloud" whereby teachers (or students) say out loud their thoughts about problems encountered while performing an activity. In this way, students can become aware of how the teacher and other learners try to resolve problems. As far as "practice" is concerned, sufficient practice is critical; it can take many forms and, as mentioned earlier, should be integrated with learning an aspect of the language. Lastly, the fourth step of "evaluation" should be based on preestablished criteria that a learner has achieved a goal. Such criteria can be jointly established when learners are beginning

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to understand procedures and can be faded when they are more comfortable with the process.

When first introducing learning strategies, especially to beginners, presenting those that are most likely to lead to success will help learners to recognize the value of this endeavor. Many researchers note that strategies which can enhance memory are the most likely candidates. Rubin et al. (2007, p. 159), note that such success will build self-efficacy (i.e., self-confidence), which is an important component of motivation. Further, they note that “learners should themselves directly feel that the knowledge given through strategy intervention is immediately and directly useful to them” (p. 159). Wenden (1987) observes that not all learners react favorably to strategy instruction and that, in particular, expert learners find such instruction a waste of time. However, since this observation was made when the custom was to present strategies one by one, instead of encouraging learners to consider which of several strategies would work for them, this may no longer be the case. Finally, after much consideration, it is agreed that there are no good or bad strategies, rather strategies that are appropriate for a particular learner, for a particular task, or for a particular goal in a particular setting.

More research is needed to confirm the long-term effect of intervention on language proficiency, to clarify how such interventions are affected by academic level, and to determine which instructional sequences are the most effective for addressing individual differences.

Role of Social Context

Research has shown that social context can affect use and acquisition of learning strategies in two ways: (a) the kind of “learning community” that the teacher builds (Takeuchi, Griffiths, & Coyle, 2007); and (b) how the culture of the subject matter influences the strategies selected by a learner (Uhrig, 2004).

Takeuchi et al. (2007) consider the role of the classroom as a learning community, noting that learning has both an individual and a social component. The social component includes scaffolding (by teachers and peers), group work, sharing problem-solving strategies, and socially constructed goals. In addition, scholars of sociocultural theory suggest that agency and power relations can affect learning, either positively or negatively. Uhrig (2004) found that the strategies which a learner uses depend on the demands of a task (e.g., degree of class participation expected, kind of assignments) and that such demands can influence the extent to which a learner needs to work with a social network to solve learning problems.

Challenges in Teaching Strategies

Teachers’ success in promoting the use of learning strategies depends on a number of variables beyond their control. Among these are mandated textbook requirements; high-stakes tests; curricula; class size and configuration; and schedules. When these macrostructures are not aligned in such a way as to facilitate the teaching of learning strategies, it can be more challenging to teach them. Rubin (2010) provides some effective solutions to these difficulties, including strong administrative support and a supportive network of colleagues. Another challenge may be learners’ beliefs and experience about who bears the major responsibility for learning. It can take a lot longer to develop learners’ ability to take control of their learning when they believe that it is the teacher’s responsibility for learning to take place. Finally, it is critical for teachers to be thoroughly grounded in the process of teaching learning strategies; administrators should provide the necessary time and training for this to happen (see Rubin, 2010, for a review of challenges in so doing).

SEE ALSO: Affect and Language Teaching; Individual Differences in the Classroom; Motivation in Second Language Acquisition; Sociocultural Theory; Working Memory in Second Language Acquisition; Phonological Short-Term; Zone of Proximal Development in Second Language Acquisition

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Suggested Readings

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