

Integrating Strategy Training to Enhance Foreign Language Learning.

Ouerrad Belabbas

Department of Foreign Languages
Djillali Liabes University. Sidi Bel-Abbes

Abstract

The implementation of the competency based approach to the teaching of EFL in the middle and secondary schools has inspired new methods and techniques at the level of syllabus design and textbook writing; and more specifically at the level of the teaching/learning process with great concern on developing learners' different competencies and skills so as to achieve the ultimate educational objective, which is learners' autonomy. Following the same objective of reforming the educational system, the Ministry of Higher Education has also introduced a new system labeled the LMD system which, as far as the teaching/learning process is concerned, resembles the one the students have been accustomed to in the middle and secondary schools, in the sense that they both have the ultimate objective of enhancing competitiveness and autonomy in learning. Consequently, this new orientation in our educational system towards learner-centered methods where the learner is central in the teaching/learning process requires a radical change in the beliefs, attitudes and teaching practice. This can be done in the form of an explicit instruction of cognitive and metacognitive skills which would help the learner become an efficient self-directed learner who would carry on his learning even after he has left school and university.

Keywords: Cognitive/metacognitive strategies, explicit training, learner autonomy, self directed learning.

Introduction

For the last decade, reforms in EFL learning and teaching have been launched by the Algerian Ministry of education, followed by the same ones in the university. These reforms aim at developing learners' competencies and skills so as to achieve the ultimate educational goal which is learner autonomy. Consequently this new approach requires new methods and techniques which need to be implemented at the level of syllabus design and textbook elaboration. It also requires a radical change in the beliefs, attitudes and teaching practice from the part of the teachers who have to change their role as the only source of knowledge, and learners have to be more active in the learning process. This shift, in emphasis, aims at promoting learner autonomy; so the learners should be equipped with the necessary tools (strategies) that make them have control of their learning. The aim of this communication is to consider the importance of language learning strategies in foreign language learning and the possibility of teaching explicitly these strategies.

Definition of language learning strategies

The word strategy comes from the ancient Greek word *strategia* which means steps or actions generally taken for the purpose of winning a war. The term strategy is defined as a plan, a step, a conscious movement or action toward achievement of a goal (Oxford 1990). In the educational context the meaning of strategies has been transformed into learning strategies, and in the domain of second and foreign language learning, it has been classified as language learning strategies.

Many definitions of the term language learning strategies have been proposed by many researchers:

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) defined learning strategies as "The special ways of processing information that enhance comprehension, learning, or retention of information".

Richard and Platt (1992) argued that learning strategies are "internal behavior and thoughts used by learners during learning so as to help them understand, learn, or remember new information"

According to Stern (1992) "the concept of learning strategies is dependent on the assumption that learners consciously engage in activities to achieve certain goals and learning strategies can be regarded as broadly conceived intentional directions and learning techniques"

Rebecca Oxford (1999) defined language learning strategies as "specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques that learners (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language. Strategies are tools for the self-directed involvement necessary for developing communicative skills".

It seems from these definitions that language learning strategies are techniques used (often consciously) by learners in order to facilitate their language learning; they are tactics which learners can employ to comprehend, learn, retain new information; these techniques are also used to store, retrieve and use the new language. Finally they are also methods that help learners evaluate their language progress during the learning process and be self-directly involved in the development of their communicative abilities.

To complete the definitions stated above by researchers, Rebecca Oxford (1999) added the following list of 12 key features of language learning strategies:

- contribute to the main goal: communicative competence
- Allow learners to become more self-directed

- Expand the role of the teacher
- Are problem-oriented
- Are specific actions taken by the learner.
- Involve many aspects of the learner, not just the cognitive.
- Support learning both directly and indirectly.
- Are not always observable
- Are often conscious
- Can be taught
- Are flexible
- Are influenced by a variety of factors

Taxonomy of Language Learning Strategies

Language Learning Strategies have been classified by many scholars in different groups, classes, and categories. The most common categories of language learning strategies are:

- Cognitive
- Metacognitive
- Social/affective

O'Malley's Classification of language learning Strategies

O'Malley et al (1985) classify language learning strategies into three categories: a) cognitive strategies; b) metacognitive strategies and c) socioaffective strategies.

a) Cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies are often linked to individual learning activities, and they involve a more direct manipulation of learning material. Among the most important cognitive strategies we find: Resourcing, repetition, translation, grouping, imagery, summarization, transfer, note taking/making, recombination, deduction, auditory, representation, key word, contextualization, elaboration of prior knowledge and inference.

b) Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies include planning for learning, thinking about the learning process, monitoring of one's production or comprehension, and evaluating oneself after a learning activity. Learners can use metacognitive strategies such as: Direct attention, selective monitoring and self evaluation.

c) Socioaffective Strategies

d) Socioaffective strategies are related to social mediating activity and transacting with others. The main socioaffective strategies are cooperating with others and asking for clarification.

Rubin's Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Rubin classifies language learning strategies into two groups and makes the distinction between strategies that directly affect learning and those which contribute indirectly to learning. She suggests that there are three major types of strategies: learning strategies, metacognitive strategies, and communication strategies. She believes that there are two types of strategies which contribute directly to the development of the language system that the learner constructs. They include both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. That is, they are thought processes used directly in learning to enable learners to deal with the new information presented in tasks and materials by working on it in different ways. For Rubin, metacognitive learning strategies are used by learners to supervise, regulate and self direct language learning. They are strategies

that involve planning for learning, thinking about learning and how to make it effective, self monitoring during learning and self evaluation of learning after the language activity is finished. Finally, communication strategies are those used by learners, when they face some difficulties in conveying the message, because of the lack of adequate knowledge of the language. Communication strategies are less directly related to language learning because they focus on the process of participating in a conversation and negotiating meaning. These strategies have been in their turn categorized into: avoidance or reduction strategies; compensatory or achievement strategies and time gaining strategies.

Oxford Classification of Language Learning Strategies

Rebecca Oxford (1990) sees the aim of language learning strategies as to develop learners’ communicative competence. She also provides the most comprehensive taxonomy of these strategies. She divides language learning strategies into two main classes: direct and indirect, which are further divided into six groups and nineteen sets (see figure 1). For Oxford, cognitive strategies are the mental strategies learners use to make sense of their learning, memory strategies are those used for storage and retrieval of information, and compensation strategies help learners to overcome any gaps in knowledge of the language and continue the communication.

Metacognitive strategies are those which enable learners to control, to supervise, to regulate and evaluate their own learning. Affective strategies help and develop learners’ ability in controlling his feelings, motivation and attitudes in language learning. Social strategies facilitate and lead to interaction with others.

Direct strategies	Indirect strategies
<p>1-Memory strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a)Creating mental linkage b) Applying images and sounds c) Reviewing well d) Employing actions 	<p>1- Metacognitive Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a)Centering your learning b)Arranging and planning your learning c)Evaluating your learning
<p>2-Cognitive strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a)Practicing b) Receiving and sending messages c) Analyzing and reasoning d) Creating structure for input and output 	<p>2- Affective strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Lowering your anxiety b)Encouraging yourself c) Taking your emotional temperature

<p>3- Compensation strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Guessing intelligently b) Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing 	<p>3- Social strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Asking questions b) Cooperating with others c) Empathizing with others
---	--

Figure 1. Oxford's Language Learning Strategies Classification

To sum up, language learning strategies maybe defined as specific actions, behaviours, plans, tactics, methods or techniques that are used by learners to facilitate the second or foreign language. These strategies contribute to the development of the learners' cognitive, metacognitive and socioaffective skills. So foreign language learners should be taught not only the language but also the learning strategies they need.

Strategy Training

The teaching of language learning strategies or strategy training of foreign language learners is drawn from a learner- centered approach to teaching. This takes into consideration that the learner is central in the learning process. In order to prepare the learner to be capable of self direction and self monitoring of his own learning, he needs to be trained and provided with appropriate learning strategies to take on responsibility for self direction and own learning, this approach is called learner training.

Learner training is defined as:

A set of strategies, procedures or activities designed to raise learners' awareness of what is involved in the process of learning a foreign language, which encourage learners to become more involved, active and responsible for their own learning, and which helps them to develop and strengthen their strategies for language learning.
(Hedge, 2000:85)

Learner training is then a set of strategies that helps the development of learners' study skills and the development of learner autonomy. It is a preparation of the learners at both levels: Psychological and methodological levels. Psychological preparation is concerned with understanding the learning process, and being aware of the teacher and the learner's roles and responsibility, and confidence building. Methodological preparation is concerned with the acquisition of study skills, strategies for learning and techniques of self evaluation. It is a preparation that helps learners to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning. It prepares learners to become effective and autonomous learners.

Learner training is an approach that attempts to make learners autonomous and able to learn by themselves inside and outside the classroom. It also aims at making learners aware of learning strategies and supply them with systematic practice reinforcement and self-monitoring of their strategies use during language learning activities. Dickinson (1993) confirmed the close link between learner training and autonomy. She believes that learner training is "learning how to learn, in that it aims to provide learners with the ability to take more responsibility for their own learning".

It seems clear that the aim of learning how to learn strategy is to create independent and self-reliant learners who are capable of taking responsibility of their own learning through the appropriate use of many different learning strategies. However, learners' ability to take in charge their own learning can be possible only if they are taught and trained to identify and use appropriate strategies while learning.

The crucial task of the teachers wishing to promote learner autonomy is to prepare their learners psychologically and methodologically to help them take responsibility for their learning. The teacher's task is to raise his learners' awareness of the effectiveness of language learning strategy use. Their task is to help their learners understand the language learning process, why the language strategies are, how to use them for accomplishing various language learning tasks, how to monitor their performance, and how to assess the outcome of their learning. Learners need to learn how to be successful language learners and be aware of the specific language learning strategies that can help them improve their vocabulary use, grammar knowledge, and foreign language skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking. Hence, teachers need to teach their learners the language learning strategies and train them how to use them. But the question is how can these strategies be taught? What is the best way to teach them?

Teaching Language Learning Strategies

According to language learning strategies and learner training researchers (Oxford, 1990) the ultimate goal of strategy training is to make learners able to take control of the language learning process, and prepare them to be strategic and lifelong learners. Then learner training must be an integral part of any foreign language syllabus, and strategy instruction should be integrated into regular class because in learner centered approach to teaching, the primary focus is not on language teaching and content but rather on developing learners' abilities, skills and competencies when learning content.

Direct and Explicit Strategy Training

Recent approach in strategy training encourages more the direct and explicit teaching of language learning strategies rather than the indirect, implicit training. "Strategy training should not be abstract and theoretical but should be highly practical and useful for students" (Oxford 1990:201). This approach is based on the belief that learning is facilitated and more meaningful if the teaching of language strategies is more explicit and direct in the sense that it helps learners develop their learning strategies repertoire and motivate them to be more active when learning a foreign language.

In direct strategy instruction, learners are told about the value, the purpose and rationale of strategy use. They are taught how, when and why to use language learning strategies. They are informed how to evaluate their strategy use, how to transfer these strategies to new situations and how to monitor their own learning. That is, enabling them to be aware of the importance of language learning strategies in learning in general and language learning in particular. Thus, learning strategy training is found to be more effective if it is explicit, direct and informed. In this explicit teaching, the teacher raises learners' awareness of the purpose for strategy use, identifies the specific strategy being used, and provides opportunities for practice and self-evaluation. So the teacher's role in informed teaching is to help the students think about their strategies so that they can develop conscious control of their learning and language use, (Wenden 1987 in O'Malley and Chamot, 1990:154) argues that "

Students who are not aware of the strategies they are using do not develop independent learning strategies and have little opportunity of becoming autonomous learners”.

Strategy Instruction Steps

A language Learning strategies lesson involves different steps: preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation and expansion.

a) Preparation phase:

- Activate learners' background knowledge.
- Raise learners' awareness, discover and discuss strategies students are already using for a specific learning task.
- Tell the learners about the importance of language learning strategies.
- Explain to the learners that you will be showing them specific techniques that they can use on their own to improve their English
- Inform them that many of these techniques have been suggested by successful language learners.

b) Presentation phase:

Present new strategies explicitly:

- Name and describe the strategy
- Model the strategy
- Explain when and why the strategy can be used
- Integrate the strategy with other language skills. That is, teach the strategy in relation with a typical class activity, such as listening comprehension, reading, pronunciation vocabulary development, grammar communicative activities, or writing
- Combine cognitive strategies with metacognitive ones for a maximum effect. For instance, have students engaged in planning for what they will learn and in evaluating what they have or have not learned
-

c) Practice phase:

- Provide extensive practice with authentic tasks (provide guidance, opportunities to practice the strategy(ies) with various tasks)
- Teach students a variety of learning strategies for each type of activity so that they choose strategies that match their learning styles.
- Encourage independent practice of the strategy(ies).
- Give feed back.
-

d) Evaluation phase:

- Develop learners' ability to evaluate strategy(ies)
- Help learners to reflect on the strategy(ies) effectiveness.
-

e) Expansion phase:

- Develop learners' skills to transfer strategy use to new tasks.
- Remind learners about using learning strategies when introducing new materials and making assignment or after an exercise assignment

- Encourage learners to develop and share learning strategies. Provide opportunities for them to discuss their own applications of the strategy(ies) with their peers
- Be patient and remind learners to be patient. It takes time to learn to use new learning strategies effectively.

-

Conclusion

Language learning Strategies are specific actions, plans, methods that facilitate the learning of a second or a foreign language. They participate in the development of learners cognitive, metacognitive and socioaffective skills. They need to be taught explicitly and integrated in a foreign language learning syllabus to give learners the opportunity to learn, and be aware of their learning strategy use. With frequent use these learning strategies may become behaviour that would make learners successful ones who would not only learn the foreign language but also be self directed, critical thinker, problem solver and effective lifelong learners.

About the Author

Dr Belabbas Ouerrad is currently a senior teacher at the Department of Foreign Languages, English Section, Djillali Liabes University of Sidi Bel-Abbes; Algeria . In 2000 he submitted his Magister Dissertation in Applied linguistics and TEFL entitled “ Pupils ' Attitudes Towards Reading English Texts .The Case of 1.AS Scientific Stream in Lycee El Haouas ,Sidi Bel Abbes ”. In 2008, he submitted his Doctorate thesis in TEFL and Didactics entitled “ EFL Reading Instruction :from Learning to Read to Reading to Learn “. His main research interests are: TEFL; Learners’ evaluation; EFL reading.

References

- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Longman.
- Chamot, A. and O’Malley, J. M. (1990). *Learning strategies in Second language Acquisition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chamot, A. and O’Malley, J. M. (1985). *Learning Strategy Applications with Students*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chamot, A. et al. (1999). *The learning Strategies*. Longman.
- Dickinson, L. (1993). *Aspects of Autonomous Learning*. ELT Journal.
- Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Oxford University Press.
- Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies: What every Teacher should Know*. Heinle and Heinle.
- Rubin, J. (1975). *What the “Good Language Learner” can Teach us*. TESOL Quaterly.