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## LEARNER STRATEGIES IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: WHICH STRATEGIES, WHEN AND HOW?

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### Introduction

Like most teachers you probably help your students to make their learning more efficient and enjoyable. In so doing you are teaching them learner strategies. Many teachers are now interested in teaching strategies in a structured way by setting aside time in the curriculum for a focus on the *how* of learning rather than the *what*. This raises all sorts of questions: when is a good time to discuss strategies, should strategies be taught separately or be integrated, which strategies are best taught first? This article discusses some of the options and shows some practical ways of including a focus on strategies in your teaching.

### What are learner strategies exactly?

There are many definitions of learner strategies, but essentially anything a learner does to make their learning more efficient or enjoyable can be seen as a strategy. This article does not discuss all the different strategies there are or the different ways they have been defined. For this, and many more points about strategy instruction, we refer you to RELC booklet number 12 on Learner Strategies in the Portfolio Series. However, it is important that you realise that there are three general categories of learner strategies:

- 1) Those that help the learner achieve a certain *learning* goal, like memorising a list of new words. An example would be to put all words into sentences that together form a text, rather than learn them individually. Another example are strategies that help in *using* the language. For example if a learner does not feel confident about talking in the new language, they could learn certain phrases by heart (for example to introduce themselves) to make it easier to have a conversation. Strategies like this are called *cognitive strategies* and they help learners to use the language more or learn more efficiently.
- 2) Strategies that help the learner to plan and monitor their learning are called *metacognitive strategies*. These help the learner become more independent and personalise their learning by allowing them to take control over the learning process. An example would be when a learner carefully listens for a feature of the target language, say the use of articles, in native speaker speech and compares this with his or her own to identify differences. Or when a learner carefully plans what they should learn first in order to prioritise their studies.
- 3) The third group are called *social/affective strategies* and these help learners to keep motivated, come in contact with the target language, and deal with the frustrations of learning a new language. Also, they help learners to find opportunities to use the language and learn the new culture. An example of this is when students work together to practise or study the language or when in a new country they join a sports club in order to meet with native speakers.

### Which strategies first?

You will find that a lot of the time you already focus on aspects of learning such as those mentioned above. A lot of human behaviour is strategic and therefore strategies are naturally part of the language classroom. But as with any teaching you want to teach this topic in the best way, at the best time, and be able to measure results. So a structured approach is necessary. But how do you decide where to start and which strategies to cover first? There is no easy answer to this question, as there are no right or wrong strategies per se. A strategy is only 'right' in the right situation and when used appropriately. Therefore there is no specific

order in which you have to teach strategies. But like with any subject you don't want to teach something that everyone already knows. So your first question should be:

*What do my learners already know and use?*

To find out there are several things you can do. Again, these are covered in more detail in RELC portfolio Series publication number 12, but in summary they are:

- a. classroom discussions, which will also allow you to discuss the rationale for a focus on strategies. You can discuss certain strategies and ask learners to show, by raising their hands, which ones they use. You can also ask them if they have been taught the strategies before. A more open-ended approach is to ask your students to imagine a particular situation and ask them to describe in their own words how they would learn or try to use the language in that situation.
- b. questionnaires can be an easy way to get this type of information too. Rebecca Oxford has developed a Strategy Inventory which is quite extensive. There are other, shorter strategy questionnaires you can use to get an idea of your students' knowledge. One example can be found on <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/questionnaire.html> The author recommends you use the questions in interviews but you can select and adapt a number for a short questionnaire.
- c. observations and focused questions: by asking learners how they perform a language task as they perform it, you can get an idea of what strategies they use and how.
- d. learner diaries: If your learners keep a journal you can ask them to include a description of how they went about using or learning the language.

This will give you a rough idea of which areas are of use to your students. There are other questions to consider:

*What do you have time for?*

Showing your students how to memorise vocabulary better is one thing, teaching them how to monitor their own progress is quite another. Some strategies take longer to teach than other. Metacognitive strategies especially can probably only be taught over extended periods of time. If you only see your students infrequently or if there is a lot of transition in your school (either of students or staff) then you will have to consider what is possible and what isn't.

*What are your students ready for?*

Similarly, some strategies are more difficult than others. Asking young learners such as primary school students to develop a learning plan, although not impossible, is probably more difficult than with more mature learners.

Similarly, not all students may be ready for a shift of focus away from the teacher and onto their learning. It depends on their educational and to some extent their cultural backgrounds. You will have to make a call as to what is most suitable for your students. A good alternative is to start with focusing on the easier strategies that have more tangible outcomes such as those improving memory. Once your students can see the benefits of this approach you can move on to more challenging strategies.

*Will it change my teaching?*

It might! If you are fully committed to making strategies a part of your teaching, and include in that metacognitive strategies such as monitoring and self-assessment, then that may have an impact on what and how you teach. It may also impact on how you test your students (or if you do so at all; some teachers have experimented with self-grading). Obviously such decisions will have affect not just your class but also your colleagues and your school. Take things step by step and discuss things with your colleagues beforehand.

**When to teach strategies?**

If you have decided which strategies you want to focus on you next have to decide when you want to do this.

#### *Integrated or separate?*

The first thing to decide is whether or not you want to set aside specific time in class to focus on strategies or whether you would rather integrate it into your normal teaching. The first option is called 'dedicated instruction' and involves an exclusive focus on strategies. It has the advantage that you can be very explicit and that your learners can easily concentrate on the topic. Also, by having a course or module on 'study skills', or 'improving your learning' or similar, you are more likely to have time to prepare classes and create or find materials. It can cost a lot of time, however.

The second option is called 'integrated instruction' as strategies are dealt with as part of normal classroom routine rather than separate from it. It has the major advantage that you can respond to students' needs or specific situations or problems that come up. Some strategies are more easily taught as part of a process as they are so closely related to the learning at hand. This applies to many metacognitive strategies, such as monitoring progress, but often preparation for using them can well be done separately. This method has the disadvantage that not all students will be able to learn or even notice the strategy you are dealing with. It is also more difficult to keep track of what strategies you have dealt with when and to make sure there is a follow-up.

There is an alternative called 'adjunct instruction'. In this case strategies are dealt with as part of normal lessons but at a specific time, for example at the end of the lesson. It has the advantage that you can still respond to specific problems that came up during class (if you take some notes) and that there is always time for rehearsal.

#### **How to teach strategies?**

Everyone will have their own preferred way but there are some important steps we recommend you take.

#### *Prepare your learners*

Before you start it is important that you prepare your learners by giving them a rationale for the focus on strategies. Not all learners may have had experience with this or be comfortable with it. Some may see time for strategies as less time for the target language and it is important that you stress the benefits of this approach. If you teach young learners you may also need to consider the parents who may have similar feelings. Consider your rationale for bringing strategies into the classroom and try to link it to the goals of your students. For example, if they are eager to use the target language with native speakers than you could show examples of how improving communication strategies will directly help them achieve this goal. Another good way to keep students interested is by doing: by teaching them a useful strategy they can see how it can benefit them and this will of course be a good motivation to continue.

#### *Teaching strategies – a cycle*

The next step is to actually teach the strategies. As with any good teaching you want to make sure your learners are given a chance not only to learn about, but also practise and evaluate the topic. The following is a cycle that ensures just that.

1. Raise awareness
2. Model the strategy
3. Try out the strategy
4. Evaluate the strategy
5. Encourage transfer of the strategy to new contexts

1. The first step is to make your learners aware of the strategy and its potential uses. Ask your students how they normally go about a certain language task and what makes that task difficult. Ask the class to think about other ways to do the task. Summarise these and present the new strategy and link it to the difficulties your students have reported.

2. The next step is to show the students how to use the strategy. Make this step as practical as possible: you could use role play or real texts (for example from the course book) to show how to apply the strategy. If the strategy is one that does not involve communication you can 'think aloud' as you do the task. Afterwards you can discuss further the various steps you took.

3. Next ask your students to use the strategy themselves. Give them all the help they need as they try the strategy. Nothing breeds success like success so you want to make sure they don't get stuck. Give everyone ample opportunity for practice so that your students become confident in using the strategy, before moving on to another one.

4. Discuss how it went and identify any difficulties your students had. Make sure that everyone knows and uses the various steps in applying a strategy. Get the students to share their experiences.

5. To make sure your students use the new strategy in their own learning you will have to encourage them to use it for a different task. Initially you can do this in a guided way, for example by giving them specific tasks, but eventually you can ask them to try and find opportunities for practice by themselves and then report back to you and the other students.

You should try and follow these steps regardless of what option you have chosen for your strategy instruction. With integrated instruction it can be difficult to follow up as there is no set programme for the teaching of strategies but we suggest you try and make an effort.

### **Practical points**

We finish this brief article with some practical points.

- Start small. Rather than embark on a major programme covering all possible strategies, it is best to try first with something that you are comfortable with and see how it goes.
- Work together with colleagues. All new things are difficult to do on your own. Also, by keeping everyone informed you avoid anyone feeling left out or causing unpleasant surprises.
- Share your experiences. Learn from each other's mistakes, share materials and success stories. Help each other keep motivated!
- Start slow to prepare your students. Give them a rationale for why you are focusing on strategies.
- Give frequent feedback and let your students share their success stories. Link strategy use to learning outcomes.
- Ask yourself how you want to assess your students' strategy use. Will you make it part of a formal assessment? Or do you just want to monitor what the students have picked up from the strategy instruction?

Finally, strategy instruction can be very challenging but also very rewarding. The main point is to make sure to link it to your students' needs. It is probably best not to force strategies on anyone. Every student has their own preferred way of studying and their own preferred strategies. What works for one student does not work for another. Giving your students an opportunity to explore this will be a great way of helping them.

### **References**

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