

Learning Strategies in a Second Language learning context

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Abstract

Learning strategies in a second language learning context involves these specific actions, techniques or processes that learners choose and then use to enhance the learning of this foreign language. The successful implementation of Learning strategies depend very much on the individuality of students that are affected by a wide range of factors. Teachers must help their students to discover their own learning style and their personal learning strategies, and finally help them to learn how to learn, directing them, activating their background knowledge before introducing a new concept and using visuals when introducing new ideas.

Keywords: Learning Strategies, English

Título: Estrategias de Aprendizaje en el contexto de segundas lenguas.

Resumen

Las estrategias de aprendizaje en un contexto de segundas lenguas se refieren a las acciones, técnicas o procesos específicos que los estudiantes eligen y luego usan para mejorar dicho aprendizaje. Para implementar estas estrategias de forma exitosa, hay que tener en cuenta las individualidades de cada estudiante, que se ve afectado por una amplia gama de factores. Los profesores deben ayudar a sus estudiantes a descubrir su propio estilo y estrategias de aprendizaje personal, y finalmente ayudarles a aprender a aprender, dirigiéndolos, activando sus conocimientos previos antes de introducir un nuevo concepto y usando imágenes al introducir nuevas ideas.

Palabras clave: Estrategias de Aprendizaje, Inglés.

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1.- INTRODUCTION

Learning strategies in a second language learning context involves these specific actions, techniques or processes that learners *choose* and then *use* to enhance the learning of this foreign language.

We frequently make a distinction between good language learners and poor or bad language learners, being the formers more successful than the latest, sometimes just because they know what learning strategies they have to use.

However, it would be better to make reference to good or bad learning strategies, instead of good or bad learners.

Before implementing Strategy Training in a classroom context the following factors should be considered:

- *Duration* of the strategy, deciding whether the strategy should be short or long term and how long should it last.
- Choosing the *implicit* (or blind) or *explicit* (informed and conscious) *treatment of strategies*, or even a combination of both.
- Deciding between a *comprehensive* or *limited* list of strategies to be taken into account and implemented, depending on the amount of strategies that are going to be used.

2.- CONSIDERATIONS WHEN IMPLEMENTING A STRATEGY INSTRUCTION

If different learning strategies are taught to the called “poor language learners” and to the students that lack of good learning strategies or do not know how to use them properly, they will probably become much more successful than without the use of them.

Teachers have a great responsibility in the process of students’ acquisition of learning strategies, especially if they are beginners.

Teachers must provide students with a few but clear strategies to put into practice to improve the communicative competence in the foreign language, teaching them how to develop these strategies, especially the ones that have a direct application in the classroom, giving them clear examples.

Thus, students get used to implement these strategies in their daily routine.

There are many *classifications* of learning strategies for second language learning.

According to **Naiman** et al's (1978) they can be divided into:

- *Learning to talk*: asking for corrections and memorizing dialogues and meaningful chunks of language, giving time to the students to practice in class, but not practicing for its own sake, but with a meaningful purpose. It is essential to train students to acquire the skills they might need to learn, so they can develop the competence of "learning to learn" and transfer the new content to new situations.
- *Learning to write*: frequent reading of what you expect to write.

Regarding **Oxford** (1990) there are several learning strategies:

- *Memory strategies*: associating, semantic mapping.
- *Cognitive strategies*: repeating, translating.
- *Compensation strategies*: using mime or gesture.
- *Affective strategies*: trying to increase motivation and self-confidence

Together with these strategies, **Valcárcel, Coyle** and **Verdú** (1996) also gave importance to the affective dimension, by which learners need to be encouraged by the teacher, taking into account the necessity for emotional control, self-responsibility, self-reinforcement, or decision taking.

According to **constructivism**, students actively construct their knowledge and so a certain degree of learning autonomy is needed: the teacher is no longer the center but a mere facilitator.

Acquisition of knowledge depends on a wide range of factors: "motivation, beliefs..., previous knowledge, interaction, abilities and strategies". **Valcárcel et al.** (1996)

Thus, learning implies the activation of several learning processes that weaker students either don't know about or even use erroneously.

It is important to consider that it is better to teach a learner how to learn and how to choose the correct learning strategy (each learner has different "best learning strategies" that might be applied to his/her own learning), rather than giving him a specific content, with no learning or teaching strategy application.

Considering the dichotomy between good and bad learners proposed by Joan **Rubin** (1975), there is a differentiation between competent learners and those who are not.

Good learners can process information effectively in different ways and are successful in the process of learning a language.

But some other learners are not proficient or skilled in the aim of learning languages, and so they need to be taught how to choose the best strategies and afterwards how to use them properly and how to deal with this new information to facilitate their own learning.

Teachers should help students to choose their best strategies and then they should provide them with practice until they can manage to use them properly without help.

But the success in language learning is linked and also influenced by several factors such as motivation, previous acquired content or how learners use strategies to learn.

There is no consensus in what strategies students should be taught or what the most effective way to do it so is, but we consider that Strategy Instruction should be taken into consideration in any case.

Following **Rubin** (1975) ideas, we can develop some basic strategies by *asking for clarification*, *correcting our own errors*, asking for *verification*, memorizing significant chunks of language, developing inductive and deductive *reasoning*, and practicing the language, creating opportunities through spending time practicing the language as watching our favorite programs in English, or interacting with other people.

For instance, students have nowadays big difficulties with oral exams, with both monologues and interactions, where they are expected to show all their skills and knowledge, working under time constraints and nervousness. Thus, to help them to solve these problems we should practice monologues and interactions in class, providing different models and helping them to develop the correct strategies, as there is not only one single kind of language learner. There are as many different types of learning strategies as learners exist.

Each person has its personal and specific way of learning, as the factors that influence their process (age, gender, previous knowledge, etc) are different for each one. There is not only one classroom, one school, one kind of teacher.

3.- POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF CONDUCTING STRATEGY TRAINING

The existing models of learning strategies that teachers normally follow are sometimes too *complex*; too much *time consuming*, too much integrated with *particular contexts*, or too *dependent* on specific teachers or curriculum, so they are not valuable to the independent language learner.

Strategies should be *clear*, sufficiently detached and oriented to learners.

Strategies must be *teachable*: the format of instruction should be direct and explicit;

To introduce strategies, teachers can use the instructional (to present, to model, to explain and to provide practice) as it can be adapted to the needs, resources and time available according to the context.

Teachers should try to integrate language learning strategy instruction into “English as a second language” classrooms as it helps learners to become more efficient.

According to **O'Malley et al.**, “the most trainable strategies are those which have the quickest return, and the least trainable strategies are those associated with aspects of language learning and cognitive processes.”

These strategies “*will vary depending on the task; the stage of the learner in the learning process; the age; the context; individual styles, and especially cultural differences in cognitive learning style*”(Kaylani 1996: 76)

Following **Nyikos** (1996), strategy instruction can help learners to:

- Become aware of the strategies they already use.
- Apply specific strategies that will help them to overcome their personal problems: nervousness....
- Monitor the effectiveness of the strategies they already use.
- Create new strategies and avoid ineffective strategies by consciously and critically reflecting on the strategies they use.

4.- CONCLUSIONS

Teachers must keep in mind that learning strategies depend very much on the *individuality* of students and they are affected by a wide range of factors. The *students' learning style* is a key factor. Teachers must help their students to discover their own *personal learning strategies* and finally help them to learn how to learn, directing students to what are really important elements, activating their background knowledge before introducing a new concept and using visuals when introducing new ideas.

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