

'LEARNING HOW TO LEARN' IN THE STUDY OF ESL

Ng Keat Slew
Institut Teknologi Mara

ABSTRACT

This paper hopes to disseminate the teaching of learning strategies in ESL as a means to 'learning how to learn'. The rationale for the teaching of learning how to learn in ESL is to help students to be effective learners and to be autonomous in their learning. The paper also identifies the specific strategies relevant to ESL, learning - memory strategies, cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies.

Introduction

'Learning how to learn' is an extremely important and essential skill in the study of English Second Language. This conclusion is based on many factors. The reports of the negative behavioral syndrome seen in ESL learners who lack this skill is one such factor. The other factor which lends support to the learning of this skill is based on the cognitive learning theory which highlights the important function of 'procedural knowledge', a type of knowledge related to knowing how to do things. An additional reason justifying the necessity to 'learn how to learn' is drawn from the research conducted on ESL learners who have become effective in their study of ESL because they have employed learning strategies which teach them 'how to learn'.

This first part of the paper puts forward a case for the teaching of 'learning how to learn' in ESL, while the second part presents the three major categories of learning strategies and their accompanying abilities which develop the skill of 'learning how to learn' in the study of ESL.

Problems caused by not knowing how to learn

Some students of ESL move easily through the ESL course achieving success. Others stumble year after year requiring help and special tuition and along the way, negative behaviour syndrome and many learning problems are developed. Rath (1967) outlines seven problems related to the negative behavioral syndrome. Firstly, he identifies impulsiveness as one such syndrome. When students are impulsive they do not stop to think or to deliberate on the tasks at hand nor do they consider the problems and their alternatives.

Overdependence on teachers is also another syndrome which often results in an inability to plan and to execute certain tasks on their own.

Thirdly, very often students cannot concentrate or pay attention to what they are doing and easily get side-tracked. This results in failure in their work and they often also miss the connection between means and ends.

Rigidity or inflexibility in thinking is yet another negative effect resulting in an inability to review alternatives, to hypothesize and to consider a number of possible solutions to a problem.

Another syndrome is dogmatic and assertive behavior. This is seen when students make assertions that cannot stand up to critical scrutiny or is not supported by evidence.

One other syndrome is the extreme lack of confidence. As students lack the experience of successful thinking and the opportunity to share their thinking operations with others, they lose their confidence and even stop to volunteer a response to a question which involves thinking and thus the students get very little out of their work.

Finally students who do not know 'how to learn' build resistance to thinking. They are unwilling to carry out thinking operations on their own and expect their teachers to outline what is to be done for them.

Given the serious negative effects that may arise due to the lack of emphasis in this area of 'learning how to learn', the importance of this area of training cannot be overemphasized and should be taught especially in the study of ESL.

Cognitive Learning Theory

The second factor which supports the need to include this 'learning to learn' dimension in the study of ESL is based on the cognitive learning theory as well as on the various research findings of the positive effects of 'learning how to learn' in ESL learners.

Cognitive theory suggests that linguistics information is stored as declarative knowledge (what we know) and as procedural knowledge (what we know about how to do something').

Declarative knowledge is stored in the form of schemata, framework or as meaningful information. In ESL therefore, the declarative knowledge could be facts about language functions or forms etc. Procedural knowledge, on the other hand, is stored as knowledge of systematic procedures and rules of how to do things.

Both these types of knowledge have specific roles in language learning. Procedural knowledge helps to transform, subsequently helps to link it to previous knowledge in the memory. In this way, procedural knowledge serves as an information processor and it also serves to aid 'learning to learn'. Hence, it is logical to assume that learning cannot take place without procedural knowledge which plays a highly vital role in the learning process.

Procedural knowledge can be likened to what Joyce and Weil (1972) refer to as information processing knowledge which is:

"...the way in which people handle stimuli from the environment, organize data, sense problems, generate concepts and solutions to problems and employ verbal and non-verbal symbols."

Procedural knowledge is also a function of the brain according to Smith (1972). The brain, according to him is considered to be an organ whose primary function is:

"to actively seek, organize, store and at appropriate times, retrieve and utilize information about the world."

Procedural knowledge helps students to acquire bodies of information or knowledge to process the information in their environment. In order to attain procedural knowledge, learners need to develop their skills in thinking and in 'learning how to learn'. However to develop these skills, learners need to learn how to use strategies specific to learning. In the language classroom, learners use their learning strategies when they are actively involved in mental activities such as analyzing data to form abstractions, concepts, generalizations and theories about the language they are learning. By employing learning strategies which develop their thinking skills, they will ultimately 'learn how to learn'.

Research findings of positive effects of Learning How to Learn

When learners employ learning strategies in their learning, they use their thinking skills which help contribute to success in learning. Successful language learners generally use appropriate learning strategies and these strategies account for their outstanding performance because they know how to think and learn. (Naiman, Frohlich & Todesco, 1975; Rubin, 1975, 1981; Wenden, 1985). Conversely, inappropriate application of learning strategies often accounts for and explains the frequent failures of poor language learners. (Hosenfeld, 1979). From research we all know that teaching of learning strategies can enhance language learning and we have also gained insights into ways to incorporate the training of strategy use into the instructional plans.

One dominant advantage of being able to use appropriate learning strategies is that this ability helps one to take responsibility of one's learning. In fact, the most important type of learning is 'learning how to learn'. This can enhance learner autonomy and self-direction. For this kind of learning, learners have to actively assimilate new information into their mental structures (Bates, 1972; Osgood, 1972).

In language learning, learners have to work with the language and then gradually refine their own linguistic understanding. Subsequently, with a great deal of practice, they become proficient in the second language on their own. This is 'learning how to learn'. Hence, the use of appropriate learning strategies that are able to encourage independent learning should be developed in ESL teaching.

Yet another advantage of teaching learning strategies is the help it can give weak learners of language. Such a course can help learners overcome the many difficulties faced in language learning. Research has shown that the training of learning strategies can help learners improve in their language study. (Denny & Murphy, 1986; Dansereau, 1987, O'Malley, Russo, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, & Kupper, 1983).

What are Learning Strategies

There have been various definitions for the term learning strategies in the literature. Strategies have been referred to as "techniques, tactics, potentially conscious plans, consciously employed operations, learning skills, functional skills, cognitive abilities, problem processing procedures."

Wenden (1987) describes learning strategies as language behavior learners engage in to learn and to regulate their learning of ESL. Chamot (1987), on the other hand, defines learning strategies as techniques, approaches or deliberate actions that students take to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content areas of information. The definition of O'Malley et al (1983) on learning strategies is any set of operations, steps, plans, routines used by learners to facilitate the obtaining, storage and retrieval of information.

All these definitions have one common element in that learning strategies equip learners by helping them to regulate, to facilitate, to store and to retrieve learning. In short, learning strategies help students 'learning how to learn'.

Learning Strategies Relevant to ESL Learning

From empirical research such as formal observations, interviews, self-reports, survey, and factor analysis study, many researchers have identified learning strategies and have gathered a substantial body of data. They have also developed taxonomies of language strategies.

The following are three major sets or classes of strategies according to their different mental processing that encode incoming information and their different purposes. They comprise memory strategies, cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies derived from the findings by Weinstein (1979); Sticht (1979); Block (1986); Chesterfield (1985); Rubin (1987); O'Malley (1985); Chamot (1988) and Oxford (1986).

By using the three sets of strategies, learning in ESL is expected to improve because learners learn how to think and how to learn. Below is a list of learning strategies and the abilities related to the strategies.

Memory Strategies

Memory strategies as the name suggests have a highly specific function in that they help learners to store and to retrieve new information. The groups of strategies in this set comprise the following:

- A. Creating Mental Images
- B. Using Elaborations
- C. Memorization Strategy
- D. Grouping

A. Creating Mental Images is a technique to help ESL learners turn information that they have understood into something easy to remember and retain for long periods in their memory. It consists of building memory by forming pictures while reading, listening to new expressions, learning grammar rules, and vocabulary. For example, when words from reading leave pictures, sounds and

feelings in the learners mind, mental images are created. Creating mental images helps learners to build their memory. In order to be able to create images in language learning, learners should be able to do the following:

- create visual images by drawing stick figures, sketches, diagrams, etc. while reading, learning grammatical rules, vocabulary and other concepts.
- create images by adding adjectives, examples and analogies to the text.

B. Using Elaborations helps learners to improve their memory by linking what they know before, to recently acquired knowledge. It also helps to connect present knowledge to each other. These improve memory as well as make the learning of new facts meaningful and memorable. This strategy is particularly useful in the reading and writing components of language learning. There are many ways to elaborate as indicated below:

- develop semantic maps or graphic representations from given paragraphs
- develop sentences and paragraphs based on given networks or semantic maps.
- generate questions and supply answers to the questions.
- provide additional information by adding analogies, examples, expansions, conclusions and clauses to given texts.

C. Memorization Strategy is an organizational device to help learners remember information like the meaning of words, expressions, or rules of grammar. In order to apply the device, learners have to:

- use associations to stimulate thinking and to trigger off meaning of words, expressions, rules etc.
- use keywords to trigger off language rules and meaning of words and expressions.
- use mnemonic devices to learn language rules.

D. Grouping involves classifying and reclassifying what is read into meaningful groups, thus reducing the number of unrelated events and making learning easy. Learners have to:

- classify and organize materials into meaningful groups based on shared characteristics or attributes
- and to label them to aid memory.

Cognitive Strategies

The second set of learning strategies is cognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies deal with techniques used by learners to manipulate incoming information and later to retrieve what has been stored. Cognitive strategies also enable learners to understand and produce new language by different means. This set of strategies comprise the following six strategies:

- A. Abstracting main idea and supporting details
- B. Using Study Skills
- C. Paraphrasing
- D. Summarizing
- E. Inferencing
- F. Deductive Reasoning

A. Abstracting main idea and supporting details is the ability to recognize the part-whole relationship and the different types of organizational patterns of texts. This entails being able to:

- understand and analyze the part-whole relationship and the organizational patterns of texts.
- recognize text markers or signal words.
- formulate frame questions and categories.
- use concepts or semantic maps to demonstrate organizational patterns in texts.

B. Using Study Skills is the ability to comprehend and appreciate a passage, to read with understanding as well as to react to the text in a number of ways. The activities of using study skills consist of the following:

- applying re-reading techniques to make meaning familiar. This will enable the processing of large chunks of information. The processes involved are
 - recognizing purposes of text;
 - distinguishing relevant from irrelevant information;
 - recognizing bias and slanted language;
 - distinguishing facts from opinion
- using the techniques of underlining and highlighting to stress important points in texts.
- understanding texts and then to make coherent outlines or notes of the materials.

C. Paraphrasing is another cognitive learning strategy. The skill is linked to the skill of writing in ESL and involves the ability to:

rephrase the contents of texts using different words.

D. Summarizing is a strategy which involves stating the most important ideas in an abbreviated and condensed form. To summarize learners have to identify writer's main ideas and supporting details and to combine them to develop a brief or condensed paragraph.

The skills involved consists of being able to decide:

- What to put in / what to leave out.
- What order to put these in.
- How to synthesize or combine different ideas to develop a single idea.
- How to state the essential points in general statements in a meaningful or orderly manner.

E. Inferencing is the skill of using the knowledge about a language and about the concepts previously learnt to guess the meaning of all new items. The skills include the following:- to predict outcomes of situations; to fill in missing gaps; to read between the lines; to extend on given materials within the limits of the materials; to compare parts; to draw conclusions and generalizations based on evidence. To infer learners have to:

- recognize statements to be true, false or not seen.
- recognize statements that are logical or illogical.
- make assumptions or logical explanations of behavior based on observed behavior or evidence.
- make predictions or logical statements about probable future behavior based on past or present behavior.
- draw conclusions based on a person's behavior or situations both current or past.

- make generalizations or logical statements about the behavior of a large group based on proven behavior of similar or smaller group.

F. Deductive Reasoning is a reasoning method which helps learners to correctly identify the arguments put forward in reading materials as valid or invalid. Reasoning of this sort will enable learners to read critically and to arrive at conclusions logically. To apply deductive reasoning, learners should be able to:

- recognize categorical syllogism, negative syllogism, and partial syllogism.
- identify valid or invalid arguments.

Metacognitive Strategies

The metacognitive strategies are methods which help learners to approach a task or to attain a goal. The application of the strategies helps learners to control their cognition. In other words, it is to coordinate their learning by using different functions. The metacognitive strategies comprise the following:

- A. Selective Attention
- B. Advance Organizer
- C. Monitoring

A. Selective Attention is an important metacognitive strategy which learners consciously use to decide in advance what they are required to pay attention to in a particular situation. It involves being able to:

- select and focus attention selectively on - key concepts, key ideas, main ideas, important information, interesting but unimportant ideas and words like discourse markers which signal important information from the texts and then to give reasons for the selection.
- rank the importance of the information hierarchically.
- develop the criteria for importance of different types of text.

B. Advance Organizer is a learning device used to aid learning in ESL. By making use of class relationship, similarity and difference relationship, definition of concepts, summary statement and analogy, learners are helped to comprehend a key concept, a basic principle or a language activity well enough to link it with what is already known in the memory as well as to organize the materials to be learnt. To use the advance organizer strategy involves knowing how to do the following about the topic:

- use expository advance organizer to help identify the class of a topic.
- use comparative advance organizer to compare old with new information, and similarities and differences.
- use definition advance organizer to examine the concept (what is the topic?), the super-ordinate concept (what is the type?), attributes (what are the characteristics?).
- use generalization advance organizer to derive a summary statement of the lesson.
- use analogy advance organizer to make a comparison between two things in order to explain or understand something. It also helps learners to see the similarities and areas of overlap in the function, composition, problems, strengths and weaknesses.

C. Monitoring is an approach where learners direct, manage and monitor their learning. It involves being able to:

- plan - determine the goals of the exercise and see how they relate to previous work; decide the best means to achieve those goals; know what skills and information are necessary to achieve the goals; anticipate potential obstacles or potential errors when achieving the goals and plan how to overcome these obstacles.
- monitor - look back at the plan; look ahead to anticipate appropriate future moves; attend to what is going on at the moment and set criteria for effectiveness and accuracy.
- assess - examine the quality of the product, the quality of the procedure and the overall plan and the ways to modify the plan for future use.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that it is definitely beneficial for learners of ESL to 'learn how to learn' by employing relevant memory strategies, cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies in their study. Learning strategies can not only produce positive effects on learning, but also eliminate the fossilized negative behavioral syndrome in learners. In addition, learners too learn to be autonomous in their search for knowledge and to take responsibility of their own learning.

Since learning strategies that train 'learning how to learn' are teachable, a programme of study should be planned. The contents and processes of teaching these strategies can be easily defined in the form of structured lessons and exercises can be designed to train learning strategies.

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