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Language learning strategies as a language teaching and learning tool

An old proverb states: “Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime”. Applied to the language teaching and learning field, this proverb might be interpreted to mean that if students are provided with answers, the immediate problem is solved. But if they are taught the strategies to work out the answers for themselves, they are empowered to manage their own learning. Good teaching involves more than communicating the content of one's discipline; a good teacher also needs both to motivate students to continue learning and to teach them the skills and strategies needed for continued learning.

R. Oxford describes learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” [3]. A given strategy is neither good nor bad; it is essentially neutral until the context of its use is thoroughly considered. A strategy is useful if the following conditions are present: (a) the strategy relates well to the foreign language task at hand, (b) the strategy fits the particular student's learning style preferences to one degree or another, and (c) the student employs the strategy effectively and links it with other relevant strategies [4]. Thus, if there is harmony between the student (in terms of style and strategy preferences) and the combination of instructional methodology, then the student is likely to perform well, feel confident, and experience low anxiety.

Yet students are not always aware of the power of consciously using foreign language learning strategies for making learning quicker and more effective [2]. Skilled teachers help their students develop an awareness of learning strategies and enable them to use a wider range of appropriate strategies.

Six major groups of language learning strategies have been identified by Oxford [3]. The researcher classified learning strategies into six groups: 1) *memory strategies*, which relate to how students remember language; 2) *cognitive strategies*, which enable the learner to manipulate the language material through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, reorganizing information, practicing in naturalistic settings, and practicing structures and sounds formally; 3) *compensation strategies*, which enable students to make up for limited knowledge, e.g., guessing from the context in listening and reading; using synonyms and “talking around” the missing word; 4) *metacognitive strategies*, relating to how students manage their own learning, e.g., identifying their own learning style preferences and needs, planning for an foreign language task, gathering and organizing materials, arranging a study space and a schedule, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success and evaluating the success of any type of learning strategy; 5) *affective strategies*, relating to students’ feelings, such as identifying one’s mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself for good performance; 6) *social strategies*, which involve learning by interaction with others, e.g., asking questions to get verification, asking for help in doing a task, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, exploring cultural and social norms.

These six categories (which underlie the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) used by Oxford and others for a great deal of research in the learning strategy field) were further divided into direct strategies (those which directly involve the target language such as reviewing and practicing) and indirect strategies (such as planning, co-operating and seeking opportunities).

Modern researchers [4] claim that language teachers can and should conduct strategy instruction in their classrooms. For some teachers it might be better to start with small strategy interventions, such as helping readers learn to analyze words and guess meanings from the context. Other teachers might want to move rapidly into strategies-based instruction, such as the model of Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) [1], which includes explicit strategy instruction, content area instruction, and academic language development.

It is important to mention that learning strategies which students use should change as their learning stage changes. Students need to know which strategies they use and monitor whether they are using the proper strategies for their goal. From this perspective, using metacognitive strategies is especially crucial for students.

English learning in our global society will apparently be a lifetime process for students, certainly continuing after their graduation. Thus, teaching English will play the much more important role of building the foundations of education for life, rather than of only providing a means of passing examinations or fulfilling a requirement. In this context, the students have to be autonomous learners as learning a foreign language without good guidance is similar to sailing without a good map. Learning strategies are the tools for students to be self-reliant. In open seas, learning can sometimes be lonely, severe, and difficult. Tolerance of ambiguity, controlling their emotions, planning or evaluating their learning - these strategies will be much more important in the 21st century. In conjunction with other techniques, learning strategies may well prove to be an extremely useful addition to a language learner's tool kit. Hopefully, the tools will work to broaden the ability to have a good command of English, which is the dream of most Ukrainians.

References:

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