

The Role of Language Learning Strategies in Teaching English

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Abstract

This paper deals with language learning strategies in teaching English. Chamot and O'Malley (1994: 60-61) lists the types of learnings strategies as:

Metacognitive Strategies
Cognitive Strategies
Social/ Affective Strategies

In this paper, theories of language learning and the types of language learning strategies will be explained. Language learning strategies will be identified. The reasons of the importance of the learning strategies will be handled. The methodology in the classes which was applied in this research will be told and the findings will be unearthed.

Key words: theories of language learning, types of learning strategies, methodology in the classes

Introduction

Learning and teaching learning strategies in English language education is a crucial topic.

As Chamot and O'Malley state that

There are two major reasons why we integrate learning strategies into the instruction of academic language and content. The first is the theoretical consistency of learning strategies with the cognitive view of learning which underlies CALLA. The second is the impressive amount of research that supports using learning strategies with academic language and content information.

This study deals with the role of language learning strategies in teaching English.

Theories of Language Learning

It is stated by Warren (2001: 61) that

Halliday (1993) states that for children, ontogenesis of language is the same as the ontogenesis for learning. So when children learn language they are learning the foundation of learning itself. Halliday interprets learning as essentially a semiotic process. Semiotics is the study of sign systems and their use. Fawcett, Halliday & Lamb (1987:34) write: " A semiotic act is any act, linguistic or otherwise, that projects cultural meanings".

Nativists, on the other hand, saw human language as a sort of biologically-inherited coding. In this they believed the language learning of small children is in their genes. Language learning was not seen as a cultural process and second language learning was seen as a quite different process altogether. Nativist beliefs which originated with Chomsky (1973) are now not so fashionable, though there is still some support for these beliefs. Asher (1972: 134) theorises that it is: " a reasonable hypothesis that the brain and nervous system are biologically programmed to acquire language, either the first or second, in a particular mode". Many now see a link between language and culture, Sampson (1997:3) writes, " the languages all human societies possess are cultural developments", and the learning of L1s and L2s are now seen as similar processes.

Ervin-Tripp (1974:205) writes, "in all second language learning we will find the same processes, over generalizations, production simplification, loss of sentence medial items, and so on". In a study of American children learning French in Geneva, Ervin-Tripp (1974) found that the subjects used similar strategies to acquire their L2 as their L1.

Halliday's functional theories of language learning are delineated (2001: 62) by Warren that

To generalise, Halliday (1993) postulates a three-step model of human semiotic development:

(protolanguage) generalisation, abstractness, metaphor, with a three to five year gap between the post-infancy steps. If L2 learning were the same as L1 learning, the L2 learners would be expected to pass through something like these 21 steps as they progressively learnt their L2.

L2 learners (if they are in a L1 country) may take their first communications with the use of mime. Next they use single words, for example going to a bakery and saying simply "bread". This one word may in effect mean, "I would like to buy some bread, do you have any?". It equates with the child uttering 'Mummy' meaning, "Mum come and play with me". The big breakthrough for an L2 learner occurs when he or she gets to the L2 equivalent of step seven and has developed a grammar in the L2. Halliday calls Step Seven: "Magic Gateway" Strategy: Finding a way in to a new activity or to a new understanding. This is the crucial first step into a fully developed grammar. It is the most crucial step in the entire language learning experience (ibid). Step Eight would be the next major stage when learners become able to generalise. Generalisation (Classifying, Taxonomizing): Naming and classes ("common" terms) and classes. A common word now functions as an annotation of an experience. A child sees a large vehicle and calls it "a bus", its mother then confirms that it is a bus or says "no it is a van", thereby classifying it (ibid). By the time an L2 learner becomes able to use metaphor, he or she has developed a high level of competency. Halliday's Step Twenty: Grammatical Metaphor (Nominilizing, Technologizing): From commonsense grammar to the Grammar of objects and technical hierarchies posits that children come to grips with metaphor at around nine years of age (ibid.). The idea of L2 Language development progressing in steps like L1 development is therefore tenable. These steps relate to initial language learning, whether L1 or L2 and after several years of learning English the learners should have reached the highest level in their L1s and be on their way to this level in their L2s.

Types of Language Learning Strategies

It is stated by Chamot and O'Malley (1994:60-61) that

Learning strategies are defined as thoughts or activities that assist in enhancing learning outcomes.¹¹ Strategies by definition are probably performed with awareness, or else they would not be strategic, although the same mental operations can be performed without awareness once they are proceduralized and have the same beneficial results with learning.

Three broad categories of learning have been proposed in the cognitive literature¹² and our own research.¹³ These types of learning strategies are based in theory and in part on the observation that students report using what seem to be executive skills with learning tasks while also using strategies that apply directly to the learning activities. The three types of strategies are as follows:

- **Metacognitive Strategies** planning for learning, monitoring one's own comprehension and production, and evaluating how well one has achieved a learning objective;
- **Cognitive Strategies** manipulating the material to be learned mentally (as in making images or elaborating) or physically (as in grouping items to be learned or taking notes); and
- **Social/ Affective Strategies** either interacting with another person in order to assist learning, as in cooperative learning and asking questions for clarification, or using affective control to assist learning tasks.

The application of strategies to learning activities is assisted by what is referred to as metacognitive knowledge,¹⁴ or knowledge of the task characteristics, of one's experiences with similar tasks, and of the strategies one can deploy in learning new information on the task. Metacognitive knowledge involves awareness and understanding of one's own mental processes and approach to learning. This is the basic process that enables using the "high road" to transfer described above.

Identifying Language Learning Strategies

It is denoted (2004:12) by Griffiths that

One of the difficulties with researching language learning strategies is that they cannot usually be observed directly; they can only be inferred from language learner behaviour. As Ellis (1986, p.14) rather colourfully puts it: " It's a bit like to trying to work out the classification system of a library when the only evidence to go on consists of the few books you have been allowed to take out". Given the difficulties of such a task, the challenge has been to devise a means first of all to record and subsequently to interpret the phenomena involved, a process which Ellis (1986, p.188) likens to "stumbling blindfold round a room to find a hidden object". Over the years, different researchers have employed a variety of approaches to this rather daunting task, one of the most frequently used of which has been the gathering of data about good language learners and about what it is that they do that makes them more successful than slower language learners.

Tanahashi (2009: 124-125) implies that

Various research studies have identified strategies used by good language learners. Naiman et al. (1978) suggest that good language learners will:

- Actively involve themselves in the learning task by responding positively to the given learning opportunity, by identifying and seeking preferred learning environments and exploiting them.
- Develop and exploit an awareness of language as a system by referring to their native language or analyzing the target language and making inferences about it.
- Develop and exploit an awareness of language as a means of communication and interaction.
- Accept and cope with effective demands of the second language.
- Constantly revise their second language system by inferencing and monitoring.

More specific techniques uncovered by Naiman et al. Include repeating aloud after the teacher and/ or native speaker, following rules as given by the grammar books or textbooks, making up vocabulary charts and memorizing them, listening to radio, TV., recordings, etc., interacting with contact with native speakers and reading any materials including magazines, newspapers, comics, etc.

Rubin (1981) studied adult learners' learning strategies and concentrated on the cognitive processes they used. The strategies they employed were:

- Clarification/ verification: the learner asks for examples of how to use a word or expression, asks for visual reinforcement of correct forms and looks up words in the dictionary.
- Monitoring: the learner corrects his or her own or others' pronunciation, vocabulary, spelling, grammar, etc.
- Memorization: the learner takes note of new items and finds some association with them for purposes of storage and retrieval.
- Guessing/inductive inferencing: the learner uses clues to guess rules.
- Deductive reasoning: the learner looks for and uses general rules. He compares his language to the target language to identify similarities and differences.
- Practice: the learner experiments with new sounds, uses a mirror to practice, talks to himself in the target language and drills himself on words in different forms.

Chamot and O'Malley (1994: 60) lists the reasons of the importance of the learning strategies as:

- Strategies represent the dynamic processes underlying learning.
- Active learners are better learners.
- Strategies can be learned.
- Academic language learning is more effective with learning strategies.
- Learning strategies transfer to new tasks.

Purpose of the study

Some students in our classes like learning new things and learning new languages, but some students are only interested in learning new things about their profession and unfortunately they are not interested in learning English or any other languages. Although some students study so much to learn the English language as a second language, they are not successful in their proficiency tests. This is because they do not know language learning strategies. This study deals with the students who use learning strategies effectively during their English lessons.

Methodology

The participants are 22 university students in the English Preparatory classes and 50 first- class students in the Faculty of Letters and Science at DEU, in Izmir in Turkey. Their ages range from 19 to 22. The participants were asked to reply the following questions every two weeks:

- How do I learn?
- How can I learn better?
- What can I do?
- How can I help my friends to learn better?
- How can my friends help me to learn better?

Experiment task

Time: 8 weeks (4 topics, 8 lessons=8 steps)

Objectives:

1. To give students the chance to practice English according to their learning strategies
2. To teach students how to make daily plans for their studies
3. To have students carry out an experiment to reveal their thinking
4. To write a report of the whole research and experiment
5. To find new thinking and creative approaches and methods in teaching and learning a foreign language
6. To give students a chance to use all kinds of strategies in learning English

Findings

Students' Attitudes

Most of the students in my classes were attending my English classes half-heartedly and they were learning English half-heartedly in the first academic term of my courses. After they had realized their improvements in their language learning, they went on writing their reports for their lessons and they passed their final exams with good grades.

Students' perceptions

Most of the students found the experiment task useful and they realised that they improved their language skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking. They also accepted that the experiment was

useful and it gave enthusiasm to them to participate their courses actively. All students accepted that metacognitive strategies such as preparing weekly reports for their classes and searching the internet make them more active individuals.

Conclusion

Up to here, theories of language learning and the types of language learning have been told. Language learning strategies have been identified. The reasons of the importance of the language learning strategies have been handled. The methodology of this study has been explained. The findings of the study showed that students learnt how to make daily plans for their studies and they improved their language skills effectively during this experiment task.

It is hoped that this study will help all colleagues to teach English with language learning strategies effectively. It is also hoped that language learning strategies will be selected effectively according to the requirements of their students.

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