

The Effect of a Language Learning Strategy Component in an English Course at the University of Quintana Roo

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Introduction

The following study reflects the effect which the implementation of particular learning strategies in an English course had on a group of students at the University of Quintana Roo. The rationale for undertaking this study was the observation that those students who seemed to make a great effort in their studies were not obtaining the results they desired. As pointed out by Brown, "A language is probably the most complex set of skills one could ever seek to acquire; therefore, an investment is necessary in the form of developing multiple layers of strategies for getting that language into one's brain" (Brown 1994:190).

In order to help students face the complex and demanding process of learning a second language, I implemented a Basic Training Programme (BTP) during the 1998 spring semester. The objectives of this programme were to give students the opportunity (1) to become aware of their learning styles, (2) to know what a learning strategy is, (3) to understand how strategies can help them in the learning process, (4) to know how to apply the strategies to specific learning activities and to know how to transfer a strategy from one activity to another so as to enhance their ability to self-direct the use of strategies in the future, and finally (5) to reflect on the effectiveness of a strategy for their particular needs.

Previous Studies on Learning Strategies

The first studies in the area of learning strategies were carried out by Stern (1975), Rubin (1975) and Naiman et al. (1978). These three studies established the general characteristics of Good Language Learners (GLL). These characteristics are presented in the following table in a comparative way to show how the findings of the studies relate to each other.

Stern 1975	Rubin 1975	Naiman et al. 1978
Have a personal learning style or positive learning strategy		Find a learning style that suits them
Have an active approach to the learning task		Involve themselves in the language learning process
Have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language and its speakers	Are willing and accurate guessers	
Have technical know-how of how to tackle a language		Take into account the demands that L2 learning imposes
Have a methodical but flexible approach, developing the new language into an ordered system and constantly revising it.	Are prepared to attend to form	Develop an awareness of language both as system and as communication
Are constantly searching for meaning	Attend to meaning	
Are willing to practise	Practise	
Are willing to use the language in real communication.	Have a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from communication	Are not inhibited.
Self-monitor and have a critical sensitivity to language use	Monitor their own speech and that of others	Pay constant attention to expanding their language knowledge
Develop the second language more and more as a separate reference system and learn to think in it		Develop the L2 as a separate system

Table 1: Characteristics of Good Language Learners in the Early Studies Compared

These initial studies created an interest in knowing more about learning strategies and their influence on the second-language and foreign-language learning processes. With these studies as a basis, different research studies have been carried out over the years. The importance of motivation, the use of strategies and the need for strategy training are especially reflected in the work that has been done since then.

Strategies are defined as “a choice that the learner makes while learning or using the second language that affects learning” (Cook 1996:103). Students consciously apply strategies; strategies are a choice they make in order to get the best results from their language learning experience.

Learning styles differ from learning strategies in that styles are unconscious, stable preferences which perceive and process information, whereas strategies are conscious measures taken to improve an individual’s day-to-day learning activities.

Strategy research has led to a distinction between strategies employed for different purposes: to communicate; to perform in the language; to retrieve infor-

mation; and to be used in the processes of speaking, listening, reading and writing, etc. Thus, we find Cohen (1998) categorising strategies as 1) those for the use of language and 2) those for learning the language. He concludes that:

Second language learner strategies encompass both second language learning and second language use strategies. Taken together they constitute the steps or actions consciously selected by learners either to improve the learning, the use of it or both (Cohen 1998:5).

The use of strategies is affected by different factors (Oxford and Crookall 1989; Oxford 1989; Rubin 1975). Oxford (1989) reported a study that researched the effect of different variables on the use of strategies such as the language being learnt, duration of study, degree of awareness, age, gender, attitudes, motivation, language learning goals, personal characteristics, learning style, aptitude, career orientation, national origin, language teaching methods and task requirements. All of these variables play a role in the use of learning strategies by students.

Motivation is considered to be the key to success not only in the use of strategies but also in all aspects of language learning. Beliefs about the success or failure in different human behaviours are related to individualised assumptions of how much control a person has over the situation (Schunk 1991; Rotter 1982). Therefore, the amount of individual involvement in the activities for learning a language may enhance motivation to practise strategies. Also, it is important to make students aware that learning is a process which *can* be modified by their active influence. Students can be motivated to use strategies by being knowledgeable about the effect they can have on the learning process, and by making an effort and actively applying strategies to their learning. Learners may put any strategy into practice because they have decided to do so, and not because a teacher has insisted that they do so. This is also related to the desire to be autonomous as learners. Students who are given the opportunity to know a variety of strategies can choose to practise those they feel best motivated by.

Various taxonomies of learning strategies have been designed; (Rubin 1981; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; and Oxford 1990). The taxonomy elaborated by Oxford incorporates most of the findings of previous research.

These findings have made people in the field of language learning aware of strategy use and its potential and shown that it is important that all professionals of second- and foreign-language learning be conscious of the useful tool which strategies represent for our students. Teachers around the world can explore the usefulness of strategies with pertinent adaptations to particular teaching contexts. Even though strategies may not be the solution to all the problems in a specific teaching environment, they can help our students to be aware of the effort that is necessary in the process of learning a language. By making learners aware of the benefits of strategy use, we are training them to be more self-directed with regard to what to practise and how to practise, and this can motivate them to seek new and different experiences during the learning process. Cook emphasises the need for learners' awareness and self-direction through learner training:

The students must be encouraged to develop independence inside and outside the classroom. Partly this can be achieved through 'learner training': equipping the students with the means to guide themselves by explaining strategies to them. The idea of learner training shades over into self-directed learning, in which the students take on responsibility for their learning (Cook 2001:129-130).

Subjects

The sample consisted of 22 students, 5 men and 17 women, with an age range from 18 to 26 years. The average length of time these students had been learning English was 9 years. Although all 22 students were studying to become English language teachers, not all had the same desire to become teachers, since some were studying the undergraduate degree programme in English language teaching simply because this was the only option open to them for studying at the university.

Instruments

For the purposes of this study, four different instruments were used:

1. The first instrument was a background questionnaire which provided general information about the participants in the study such as: age, gender, number of years studying English, and the activity they enjoyed the most when studying English (see Appendix 1).
2. The second instrument was the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Rebecca Oxford (Oxford, 1990). The SILL was applied twice: once before and once after the strategy training programme in order to compare the results for the four groups of strategies included in the BTP programme.
3. The third instrument was a learning diary in which students recorded their strategy use and wrote freely about the way they felt while employing a specific strategy or group of strategies. This instrument was most revealing because students expressed their feelings openly.
4. The fourth instrument was a final questionnaire in which students answered three closed questions and one open question. The closed questions were designed to determine whether students knew about a particular strategy before the programme, if they had actually used that strategy, and if the BTP had helped them in any way, as well as to know their specific opinions about the BTP. (see Appendix 2).

Procedure

The first step in developing this programme was to put together a required reference reading list which included readings, articles and activities in English and Spanish regarding learning styles and strategy practice. I decided to give students this material so that they could become familiarised with the topic before asking them to practise a specific strategy. These references were very helpful for the students during the BTP.

The Oxford typology of strategies was used as a basis for the training programme. According to the information obtained from the first application of the SILL, the strategies that needed particular attention were the 1) metacognitive, 2) affective, 3) cognitive and 4) memory groups. Thus, the BTP focused on practicing these four groups.

During the first two weeks of the semester, an introduction to the programme was given by providing explanations, readings, discussions and activities concerning learning styles and strategies. Students were encouraged to analyse their learning behaviour in order to identify their own learning styles. They were then introduced to the use of learning strategies through an explanation and demonstration of the classification employed by Oxford. Students were shown the subgroups of strategies for each of the groups included in the training programme. Some strategies from each group were practised in order to give students an idea of what would be expected of them in the following months.

After the two introductory weeks, students were instructed to use any strategy from the four groups already specified and to apply them to any activity while inside or outside of the classroom. Students were encouraged to practise the strategy of their choice during the lessons and also outside of the language class, and for two weeks they had to report about their practice in a diary entry.

Guidelines for the entries in the students' diaries were established. Students were responsible for handing in their diaries every two weeks, and were asked to focus their writing on the following questions:

1. What did you do?
2. What did you learn?
3. How did you feel?
4. What would you like to do (for the following two weeks) ?

The first question was designed to establish what students had been doing. The second aimed at discovering whether they had found the strategy helpful or not. The third question was designed to elicit their feelings about practising the strategy, while the fourth aimed at guiding students toward the use of another, usually different strategy in the following two weeks. Finally, students answered the SILL for the second time at the end of the term.

Results

Students were given the option of marking different reasons as the rationale for learning the foreign language. Table 2 shows the results of Question Number 12 of the questionnaire (Appendix 1) regarding the reasons why the students were studying English

Reason	Times marked
To make friends	11 students
Culture	13 students
Travel	15 students
Interest in the Foreign Language	19 students
Future career	21 students
To graduate	22 students

Table 2: Options marked by students as their reason for learning English. (Total number of subjects: 22)

All of the respondents stated that they enjoyed learning English (which is the language all of them reported studying). Only four had studied another foreign language previously. Of the 22 students who participated in the study, 22 considered their English language learning to be a means to graduate, and 21 considered it to be useful for their future careers. Although students had different levels of motivation for studying for a degree, they all considered English important for their future careers. This was because, despite the fact that some students were only enrolled in the undergraduate programme in English in order to transfer to their first choice of study in their second year, they would eventually need to pass a Cambridge-recognised examination in order to graduate. This explains the importance of English for all of them. They realised that they were engaged in something productive in that gap year that would help them to graduate, whatever their degree choice ulti-

mately might be. So, even though they did not all want to become English teachers, they all considered English important.

The first application of the SILL showed that this group of students scored the lowest in the affective group of strategies (3.31%). It was important, then, to develop those affective abilities to help the students cope with the demands, frustrations and anxieties involved in the learning of a foreign-language. The affective aspect in the learning process should be very carefully addressed. If we as facilitators of the language learning process inspire our students to feel confident, trusting, and safe, they will be willing to do the different activities asked of them and, gradually, will become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses.

The social strategies group received the highest percentage of the students' responses. This result suggests that students already used co-operation with classmates, teachers and native speakers when the opportunity arose. Compared with some of the other categories, memory strategies scored relatively low (3.40%); This fact can be explained by the students' tendency to focus only on rote memorisation, to the exclusion of any other memory technique for recalling information. It was therefore important to show students a variety of techniques for committing language items to memory.

Cognitive strategies, which are usually considered most important in foreign-language learning (Wenden and Rubin 1987; Oxford 1990; O'Malley and Chamot 1990), were also represented by a low score (3.55%). It was therefore necessary to reinforce this group of strategies with this particular sample of students. Metacognitive strategies were also included in the BTP because students needed to be instructed in ways of organising their study. Mexican students in general assume that studying means memorisation, so they tend to study almost exclusively for examination purposes and are not used to establishing a regular study schedule that would allow them to investigate further what was explained by the teacher in class. It was therefore fundamental to start fostering in them the need to invest time in the learning process by means of a timetable they themselves could design which would include some specific time for further exploring particular topics that were not clear to them, or for practising skills they were not proficient in. Finally, compensation strategies achieved a fair rating (3.47%) in relation to the other five groups of strategies. This demonstrated that students were making use of some strategies to compensate for the unfamiliar meanings of words or even of entire topics.

The Basic Training Programme allowed students to choose the particular strategies which they considered to be beneficial for them through an analysis of their learning styles and goals for the course. One of the first tasks they performed was an analysis to find out their own preferred learning style. This was important because I wanted students to see the close relationship between styles and strategies. After finding out their preferred learning styles, students were asked to determine if the strategies they already practised were, in fact, in accordance with their learning styles. Not surprisingly, some were and some were not; in both instances students had the opportunity to reflect upon the helpfulness of those strategies and to experiment with different ones every two weeks. The activity of choosing strategies was aimed at developing student responsibility and self-direction so that students could decide for themselves what to do, without the teacher directing them to use a particular strategy for a specific activity. Also, through their journal entries the students had an opportunity to reflect on whether they found the chosen strategies to be effective, enjoyable and useful for the purpose they had in mind when

selecting them. As a result, the students were simultaneously reflecting on and becoming aware of the different aspects involved in the language-learning process. I considered this factor a very important one since sometimes English teaching and learning are considered "easy" and students can benefit by becoming more aware of what English teaching and learning realistically involve.

At the beginning of the programme, some students were reluctant to participate, so I had to convince them through individual tutorials of the benefits they would achieve from it, not only for my course but also for courses in their field of study in general. I had to make a great effort during the first two weeks of the semester to arouse students' interest and encourage their involvement. As the programme progressed, students changed their views. Some who were initially reluctant even suggested modifications of the strategies in order to better suit their particular purposes. Also, through the comments in their diaries I could verify that they were indeed reflecting on their learning.

During these two weeks, I continued practicing the strategy: Using imagery. I read different kind of articles for having many vocabulary. I read articles like: The truth story of Nancy Nelson, it's about a woman who was very strong when she knew that she has a tumor. The goal of reading this type of articles it's increase my vocabulary from different articles. I think I have achieved to learnt many vocabulary without any notice, because when I talk with foreign people or with my English teacher I use new words. That makes me feel happy because it means that I'm improving. (Extract from a student journal)

From the comments expressed in the final questionnaire, I could verify that, in spite of the short duration of this programme, students experienced a change in their attitude and developed a sense of responsibility in conducting the planned activities with a specific strategy. I also did a follow-up through the three subsequent language courses which they took in the following 18 months. All 22 students did continue in the degree programme and passed the three English levels with good grades. This was significant because enrolment in the ELT programme generally drops by 50% after the first year; and additional students may withdraw each semester.

A very important aspect of the BTP was the individualised attention which each student received through tutorials and via the feedback about their journals every two weeks. I feel that these two factors increased the students' motivation by enhancing their belief that they were being taken seriously as individuals. Although the journals focused on strategy practice, students also used them to express their feelings about other aspects of their learning experiences. Furthermore, during the tutorial sessions, students brought up not only their educational concerns but some of their personal worries as well. The time and effort given to each of the students made them feel they were important to me as students, and this undoubtedly contributed to the study's positive results.

SILL Application Results

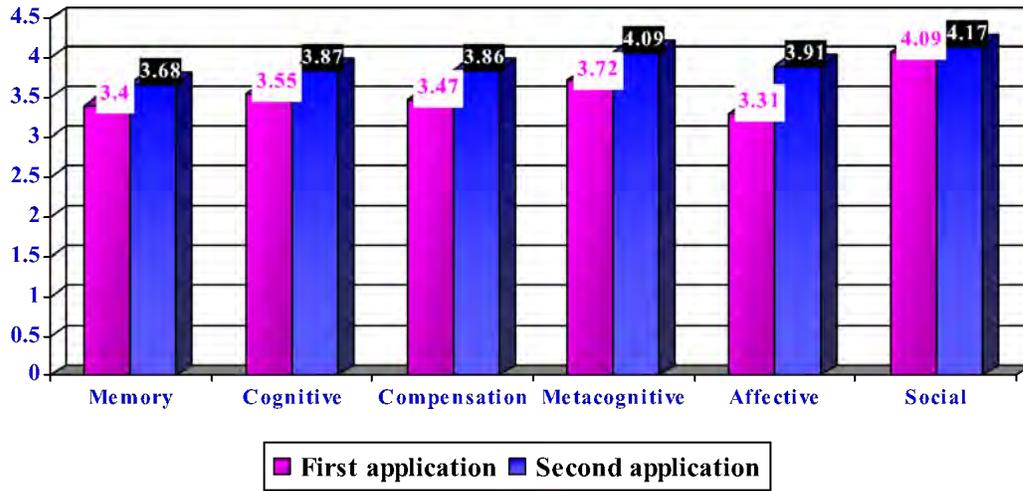


Table 3: Results of the first and second applications of the SILL

The results of the second SILL showed that the use of the four groups of strategies students worked on increased. The increment in strategy-use by students can be considered fair if we keep in mind that students were practicing the chosen strategies for a period of only four months. As commented before, students exercised self-choice and this led some of them to practise the same strategy longer if they found it useful for their particular purposes. Thus, the same group of strategies was practised for some weeks by different students. The strategies that proved to be most useful for students were: structured reviewing, using imagery, taking notes, paying attention, organizing, repeating, practicing, using music and discussing their feelings with someone else.

Conclusions

The first reaction students had towards the programme was not very positive, but the results showed that they were using more strategies by the end of the programme; they practised between 9 and 15 strategies during the BTP. This was significant because most students initially recognized that they were not using strategies to help them in the learning process except for the strategy of rote memorization. I believe the purposes of the study were accomplished since students were able to 1) recognise their learning styles, 2) use strategies for the different activities of the course, 3) exercise self-choice and 4) reflect on the learning process.

A programme in which teachers can help learners become aware of their learning styles and of the practical use of strategies can help teachers know more about their students and lead students to better approach their learning experiences. Thus, the opportunity to approach teaching and learning in a different way could be beneficial for both teachers and learners.

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Appendix 1

BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name _____ 2. Date _____

3. Age _____ 4. Sex _____ 5. Mother tongue _____

6. Language(s) you speak at home

7. Language you are now learning (or have most recently learned) List one language only

8. How long have you been studying the language in question 7 ?

9. How do you rate your overall proficiency in the language listed in number 7 as compared with the proficiency of other students in your class ? (circle one)

Excellent Good Fair Poor

10. How do you rate your over all proficiency in the language listed in number 7 as compared with the proficiency of native speakers of the language ? (circle one)

Excellent Good Fair Poor

11. How important is it for you to become proficient in the language listed in number 7? (circle one)

Very important Important Not so important

12. Why do you want to learn the language listed in number 7 ? (check all that apply)

_____ interested in the language

_____ interested in the culture

_____ have friends who speak the language

_____ required to take a language course to graduate

_____ need it for my future career

_____ need it for travel

_____ other(list) _____

13. Do you enjoy language learning ? (circle one) Yes No

14. What other languages have you studied ?

15. What has been your favourite experience in language learning ?

Appendix 2

UNIVERSIDAD DE QUINTANA ROO

CUESTIONARIO

Investigación: Estrategias para el aprendizaje de la lengua inglesa.

Nombre: _____ Fecha: _____

Con el propósito de ayudarte a aprender diversas estrategias de aprendizaje para un mejor desarrollo como estudiante se ha diseñado el taller que ya tuviste oportunidad de experimentar. Agradecería contestaras las siguientes preguntas para conocer tu opinión y mejorarlo.

1. ¿Conocías algún tipo de estrategia antes de llevar el taller ?

SÍ NO

2. ¿Usabas algún tipo de estrategia antes de llevar el taller ?

SÍ NO

3. ¿Te ha ayudado en tu aprendizaje de la lengua inglesa el taller de estrategias ?

SÍ NO

4. Agradecería me comentaras detalladamente de que forma o en que manera te ha ayudado el taller si es que te ha ayudado a aprender mejor y tu experiencia a lo largo de este proceso.