

Using Metacognitive Strategies to Enhance Research Writing Ability

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Introduction

Difficulties faced by learners during the accomplishment of different learning tasks are common in all educational institutions. Therefore, researchers attempted long time ago to find out new ways of teaching that can help well all learners. As a result, the role of the teacher, from one hand, became that of a facilitator, manager and a helper of learners; on the other hand, learners are no more passive recipients, but should be active, independent and self-reliant. The integration of language learning strategies to courses has been viewed as a way to reach such outcomes, and proved to be of noticeable success in many tasks, with different learners, in different places in the world. Along with these findings, this article aims at showing and clarifying the role of metacognitive learning strategies, if implemented appropriately in class, in improving learners' ability to write generally, and to write a piece of research specifically.

1. Defining Language Learning Strategies

The word 'strategy' has a Greek origin –strategia- which means "steps or actions generals take for the purpose of winning a war" (Oxford, 2001, p 362). When the term was introduced to the field of education, it took a new meaning that was first approached by Rubin (1975: 43) as "techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge". Further definitions followed during the 1980s and 1990s up to present. However, Although researchers accept the concept of learner strategies, an overall consensus concerning their definition, nature and other related issues has not yet been achieved. In other words, whether LLS are mental, behavioral or emotional, what can be named a strategy or sub strategy and whether they are conscious or unconscious all are matters of concern to many researchers.

A global LLS definition is provided by Weinstein , Husman & Dirking (2000: 727) who posit that "learning strategies include any thoughts, behaviours, beliefs or emotions that facilitate the acquisition, understanding, or later transfer of new knowledge and skills", making LLS cognitive, behavioral and emotional at the same time. This view was supported by other researchers who manifest that they can be all of these since they are pedagogy aids.

A further issue, which is not solved, is the basis upon which normal and strategic behaviours can be distinguished, in other words, when it can be said that a given learning activity is strategic or not . To find out answers to this question and others concerning LLS, lists of LLS features have been outlined to better clarify what they are.

Features of Language Learner Strategies

The LLS concept is better defined by listing strategy characteristics. Although these characteristics are also described differently, they contribute in the formulation of a more precise definition. Most LLS characteristics are outlined by Oxford (1990):

- LLS contribute to the main goal, communicative competence.
- LLS allow learners to become more self-directed.
- LLS expand the role of the teacher.
- LLS are problem-oriented.
- LLS are specific actions taken by the learner to tackle learning problems, not general approaches.
- LLS involve beyond cognitive aspects; metacognitive, and social aspects are also included.
- LLS support learning both directly and indirectly. Directly by using the new language *per se*, indirectly by using other

tools that contribute to learning powerfully like planning, evaluating...

- LLS are not always observable. They can be observable like taking notes, but the majority are unobservable because they are mental activities or because they are used outside class in informal situations.
- LLS are often conscious. Most researchers agree that they are conscious but their use can be automatic i.e. learners are able to identify what they do or think, this means that they are aware, and LLS are conscious.
- LLS can be taught; LLS are subject to change, learners can be taught why, when, how to use and how to transfer LLS to new situations to maximise learning experience for both successful and unsuccessful learners, inside and outside class.
- LLS are flexible, not predictable, and their use depends on the learners' choice.
- LLS are influenced by a variety of factors: degree of awareness, proficiency level, task requirements, teacher expectations, age, sex, nationality/ethnicity, learning style, personality traits, motivation, the purpose of learning, in addition to personal beliefs about language learning and education.

Based on these features, Oxford (1990) provided the most comprehensible, detailed and used strategy classification or taxonomy. She divided strategies into two main groups: direct strategies including memory strategies (e.g. using imagery, associating...), cognitive strategies (e.g. highlighting, analyzing expressions...) and compensation strategies; indirect strategies including metacognitive strategies (e.g. planning, organizing...),

affective strategies (e.g. using music, rewarding oneself...) and social strategies (e.g. asking for correction, clarification, verification...).

Terminology Used for 'Strategy'

The complexity of LLS definition is partially due to the use of different overlapping terminology. Authors used different terminology interchangeably with the term strategy, these include: techniques, devices, mental procedures, behaviours, approaches, specific actions, thoughts, beliefs, processes; tricks, tactics, attitudes, exercises, learning activities... In fact, these terms do not have the same meaning as strategy.

2. Defining Metacognitive Strategies

Although all learning strategies are useful and helpful for learners, it was found that LLS are more effective when not used in isolation (Anderson, 2005); they should be related and used in a chain orchestrated by metacognition. For that, metacognition and metacognitive strategies gained more emphasis in recent LLS research.

Metacognition is thinking about thinking in a critical productive way and not just thinking back. Learners' critical reflection on their learning enables them to make conscious decisions about what should be done concerning their learning and their strategy use (Anderson, 2005); they can consciously decide about the effectiveness of their used strategies and think of other possible techniques to act better.

Developing learners' awareness about what has been learned is achieved through developing metacognitive strategies. Research studies revealed that good language learners use frequently and widely metacognitive strategies (Anderson 2005) and that ineffective learners lack them, in other words, ineffective learners lack the ability to select and combine strategies effectively depending on the task's demands (Macaro, 2001). Therefore, Anderson (2005) posits that metacognitive strategies play more significant role than other strategy categories do; they result in developing stronger cognitive skills and faster learning. Learners' thinking about the learning process includes setting goals, planning for the learning tasks, monitoring and evaluating their own learning. Thus, "Students without metacognitive approaches are

essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishment and future learning direction” (O’Mally and Chamot, 1990: 08).

This paper focuses on certain metacognitive strategies. They are those strategies that support learning a language indirectly; by which learners plan, organise, monitor and evaluate their own learning and strategy use. They help in developing the writing ability together with the other skills.

2.1. Overviewing and Linking with Already Known Material (Activating Background Knowledge)

Definition: it is used when learners know the topic of the task. They retrieve information and knowledge they have about the topic, use and link it with new information. The teacher helps learners in doing few associations, as examples, and let them do the rest.

Rationale: by activating background knowledge, learners get ready to the task. They will find acquiring new information easier when they relate it to already known and familiar material (Chamot et.al. 1999; Oxford 1990). It also leads to learners' interest and involvement in class.

Example: learners base the selection of their topic of research on what they have as background knowledge either a personal experience, information found in books..., for example, a learner notices that all classmates are complaining about the way through which the teacher corrects oral mistakes, so she decided to investigate the best way of feedback in oral expression sessions. When linked to already known material, reasons and aims are clearly traced, and motivation and interest are strongly kept.

2.2. Organizing

Definition: learners organise their learning environment, either in class or at home, to be comfortable; organise their time putting weekly schedules for outside class learning without forgetting time of relaxation; and organise tools needed for tasks' achievement, mainly notebooks in which they write down every detail about their learning (Chamot et.al. 1999; Oxford 1990).

Rationale: organising the learning environment and notebook, together with the time of study outside class enables

learners to profit as much as possible in a short time. It makes them feel at ease, concentrate and do not waste time while learning or revising.

Example: Before writing, learners should organize books according to their use- may be chapters or sessions-, prepare a notebook, use colours to write down different notes ... It is also important to organize in a comprehensible way citations to avoid plagiarism or wasting time later on looking for references. In analyzing results, deciding about a way to classify similar responses before discussing them is very helpful and beneficial.

2.3. Setting Goals and Objectives

Definition: goals are long term aims that might be achieved in months or years, whereas objectives are learners' aims that can be achieved in hours, days or weeks. Learners decide about the outcome they will get from a task or group of tasks. The teacher should help learners in setting feasible goals and objectives, and the time needed for their attainment.

Rationale: without setting goals and objectives, learners cannot get the wanted outcome. They give direction and help in planning and selecting other learning LLS. The foundation of a learner-responsible class begins with helping students understand the meaning and importance of setting their own learning goals.

Examples: setting objectives and goals includes:

- To finish reading certain books by the weekend.
- To read a book and extract the main ideas; this objective guides the learner to select appropriate reading strategies: skimming, scanning...
- To write a chapter or a part of it in a month.

2.4. Planning for a Language Task

Definition: planning involves identifying the task, planning how to accomplish it, sequencing the generated content, and selecting material (phrases, words, expressions, etc.) to be used.

Rationale: developing a plan gives direction to learners and helps them moving towards a safe accomplishment of the task. It also reduces anxiety and builds self confidence throughout the task.

Example: when writing a piece of research, learners develop a plan for the steps –beginning, middle and end- , the content of each step and material that will be used (ideas, items, etc.)

An important example is the planning of the experimental study, learners decide about the population, the setting (time and place), the method (observation, questionnaire...)

2.5. Self-Monitoring

Definition: learners return back to reconsider their task management, to notice and correct their mistakes and selected strategies by asking themselves if what have been done makes sense. They can use self-talk to encourage themselves go ahead throughout the task without giving up, and exchange peer monitoring and feedback. However, too much correction, either by teacher or peers, may lead to defeat feelings.

Rationale: monitoring helps learners to identify possible problems and keep advancing towards a successful accomplishment of the task. Working with peers allows for sharing strengths and learning better.

Example: the learner reads what has been written and asks whether it makes sense, reconsiders the ideas and forms and corrects them, check that all authors are cited appropriately...

2.6. Self-Evaluating

Definition: learners judge and evaluate the achievement of learning goals, strategy use and language learning in general. They decide whether they have successfully achieved their learning goals or not, if not why and what should be done to do better next time. Checklists, journals and diaries are tools that can be used to help learners evaluate their progress.

Rationale: evaluating progress helps learners to decide whether they need to go back and have more information, whether their strategy use is appropriate or other strategies should be used next time. This enables them to build gradually self confidence and independence.

Example: learners evaluate their research paper, if it contains all necessary parts and information, if there is a balance or a part should be extended or reduced.

Specific parts can be also evaluated, for example, to evaluate the questionnaire; whether it leads to collecting necessary information to confirm the hypothesis or not.

3. Strategy Instruction

From the early beginning of strategy research, its aim was helping less effective learners to enhance and control their learning. Bringing the findings of this research into class results in the emergence of what is called 'strategy-based instruction' or 'strategy training'.

Strategy training or strategy-based instruction (SBI) is "[the] teaching of how, when, and why students should employ [Language] learning strategies to enhance their efforts at reaching language program goals" (Chen 2007, p20). It is a suggested solution to help less effective learners –and even effective learners- to deal with the daily learning problems. Rubin (1975) claims that knowing what good learners do to learn can help weak learners to overcome their difficulties. Less effective learners are not aware of strategies they may use to tackle different tasks; even when they are aware, they use them in a random way; they are not able to introduce new strategies regarding the task in hand. Unlike effective learners who change helpless strategies, less effective learners stick to the same strategy, repeating it several times—may be surrendering- even if they feel its inappropriateness (Chamot et.al 1999; Chen 2007). Thus, teachers seeking an effective learning should identify and understand their learners' individual differences, preferences and strategy use then guide them to use others.

It is argued that SBI is effective providing that it is conducted under the right conditions. Brown (2000) suggests that, for an effective SBI, learners should: "(a) understand the strategy itself. (b) Perceive it to be effective. (c) Do not consider its implications to be overtly difficult" (ibid, p131).

Furthermore, SBI effectiveness is affected by a number of factors:

- Students' beliefs in the usefulness of SBI, strategy use, their ability and willingness to be responsible and independent.

- Teachers' beliefs in SBI effectiveness, in learners' ability to succeed and be independent through strategy use.
- Classroom context; learners should be allowed to be initiative and risk-takers without losing classroom management and order.
- The choice of language used in strategy instruction.
- The instructional approach: whether learners' mistakes are tolerated or not; whether strategy instruction is explicit or implicit, integrated or separate; how strategies are presented to learners, practiced and scaffolded. (Chamot et.al.1999, pp35/39)

Hence, An extensive number of studies report that LLS can be taught and result in promoting learners' performance, and that strategy training is successful across a variety of populations and levels (Chamot et.al. 1999, Oxford 1990).

Although most researchers agree upon the usefulness of SBI, they disagree upon its implementation in class: should SBI be explicit or implicit? Integrated or discrete? And what is the language of instruction?

Explicit versus Implicit Strategy Training

In explicit strategy training, learners are overtly informed about how, what and when to use strategies, and how they can be transferred to other tasks and situations. In contrast, in implicit strategy instruction, learners are led to use certain strategies without being informed. Although implicit

instruction may be helpful, most researchers agree that explicit instruction is more effective. It helps learners to be aware of strategies they use, practice new ones, evaluate and transfer them to new tasks. Without being explicit, learners will not know what, how and when to use strategies, and how to transfer them to new situations inside and outside class; learners "need to be metacognitively aware"(Anderson 2005, p767). Furthermore, the absence of an explicit explanation of strategy rationale makes some learners feel that it is useless, and be satisfied with what they are already doing, avoiding other helpful strategies because they conceive them as complex (Chamot et.al.1999).

Integrated versus Discrete Strategy Training

Including strategies in language classrooms has a wide consensus among researchers. However, the way they should be interwoven is problematic, should strategy instruction be integrated within classroom activities or as a separate course? Proponents of discrete SBI, demonstrate that integrating LLS into class activities may hinder their transfer to new tasks, and that it is easier to provide a separate course than to prepare all teachers for teaching strategies.

Researchers supporting classroom integration argue that this kind of instruction enables learners to practice strategies within authentic tasks; what is more profitable is to make learners practice LLS in authentic tasks. In addition, integrated SBI is more useful in the case of overloaded courses; instead of adding extra courses,

strategies are interwoven within the already designed activities. Moreover, in separate strategy course, the lack of motivation is a major learning obstacle, and raises other problematic questions about whether SBI should be before or in parallel with content courses.

4. Impacts of Strategy Training

Strategy training impact can be sensed during and after the period of training, inside and outside class, for both learners and teachers. It helps in:

Enhancing Learning

Most researchers agree that the purpose of LLS is to enhance learning. They enable learners to perform different tasks – if chosen appropriately-, help in solving specific learning problems and make learning easier, faster, and more enjoyable. Research indicates that the efficient use of LLS results in enhancing L2 proficiency in general and different skills in particular; learners develop "a more practiced eye, a more receptive ear, a more fluent tongue, a more involved heart, a more responsive mind"(Oxford 1990, p ix). In research it helps in developing the writing ability, from one hand, and the ability to collect an acceptable research, from the other.

Promoting Learner Autonomy

In the 1960s and 1970s, educational studies showed a growing dissatisfaction against authoritative teaching. It has been argued that more successful learning is attained when learners

are active, initiative and not spoon-fed. Since then, learner autonomy has been the aim of educational systems. Researchers agree that learners can not achieve learning goals and the target competence unless they took responsibility of their learning, and that autonomous adult cannot be the result of spoon-feeding educational systems. Consequently, SBI is proposed to be the way and the key to learner autonomy. Hence, teachers can help their passive students to develop autonomy through strategy training (Brown 2000). Far from being just a possible solution, the principle goal of strategy training is to enable students take control of their language learning process. Consequently, it helps shifting learning responsibility from teachers to learners. However, this shift in responsibility does not entail a full abandonment of responsibility in the part of the teachers. In other words, autonomy is not limited to learning without a teacher (e.g. distance learning); learners' autonomy develops gradually, through teachers' scaffolding to enable learners become aware of themselves, the techniques they use, and capable of judging their learning. In spite the importance of autonomy, teachers and learners are more likely to resist it because of the difficulty that teachers sense in changing their roles. Being unfamiliar with learner-centered teaching, some teachers conceive it as a threat to class order and view it as a step towards class chaos. Learners, having passing exams as their major learning aim, would prefer the teacher to provide them with what they should study. Hence, they have just to follow. Thus, SBI helps both teachers and learners to overcome fear and to

accomplish their roles in the LMD system. Autonomy in this case is crucial because the supervisor is just a guide, learners have to decide about most of the work.

Raising Motivation

A major goal of SBI is to raise learners' motivation through fighting negative beliefs because learners are often demotivated when they conceive themselves as low achievers, and when they feel that they lack aptitude and tricks used by good learners. Strategy training helps and supports less effective learners, and even effective learners, by providing a variety of strategies which they can use to tackle different tasks, and to change those inappropriate ones which cause failure. Achieving improvement in their learning performance will make them more motivated. Hence, they will learn better. Thus, SBI produces learners with "more skill and will". Motivation in research is very important because losing interest in the subject or in the research hinders its accomplishment.

Stretching beyond the Learning Style

Strategy training helps learners to use a variety of LLS that used to be uncomfortable; learner strategies that do not go with learners' learning style. Learners can stretch their learning styles by enriching their repertoire with new strategies (Oxford 2001). Stretching the learning style helps in avoiding 'style wars' between learners and teachers, on one hand, and learners and their peers, on the other. These clashes in styles lead generally to generating negative attitudes and lessen the quality of learning.

Writing in inappropriate style is a major disadvantage of research papers that leads to severe critics like presenting a scientific study using a literary style.

Transferring Learner Strategies to New Tasks

The early research on learner strategies revealed learners' inability to transfer strategies to different tasks, and that the ability of strategy transfer can be prompted significantly through teachers' help. SBI enables learners to develop their strategy use and metacognitive knowledge. It raises their awareness concerning strategies they use, provides them with new ones, helps them to transfer these strategies across tasks and from the native language to the target language and vice versa. Therefore, learners profit more from the learning environment (Anderson 2005). Strategy instruction that does not allow the transfer of strategies to other situations is of little value (Weinstein et.al. 2000). Transfer of strategies used in the first research leads to successful achievement and writing of other researches.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, it can be said that the appropriate implementation of metacognitive strategies – planning, organizing, monitoring, evaluating, linking with previous knowledge and setting goals- can help teachers in guiding and teaching their students the principles of research writing, as it can help learners to write a successful piece of research together with helping them to

be autonomous, goal-directed and self-confident researchers who can carry on significant researches in the future.

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