
Instruction in learning strategies

Instrucción en estrategias de aprendizaje

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Summary

The instructional approach in learning strategies focuses on teaching students—especially less effective learners the conscious methods that successful language learners use. Rather than “training,” the preferred term “instruction” emphasizes guiding students to develop responsibility and awareness about their own learning process.

Key words: learning strategies, strategy instruction, learner autonomy, metacognition, self-monitoring, affective factors.

Resumen

El enfoque de instrucción en estrategias de aprendizaje busca enseñar a los estudiantes—especialmente a los menos eficaces las técnicas utilizadas por los mejores aprendices. Se prefiere el término “instrucción” en lugar de “entrenamiento”, ya que transmite una guía más flexible y consciente para fomentar la responsabilidad y el autoaprendizaje.

Palabras clave: estrategias de aprendizaje, instrucción en estrategias, autonomía del aprendiz, metacognición, autoevaluación, factores afectivos.

1. Introduction

Much research on second language acquisition has focused on the identification, description, and classification of learning strategies used by students. The first step in research has been to describe the strategies used by good learners as opposed to those used by less effective learners. Once the strategies employed by students who achieve good results have been identified, the question arises as to whether those with low effectiveness can learn to use strategies that help them in their learning process, and if so, what strategies can and should be taught, and what approach the instruction of the selected strategies should take.

1.1. Use Of Terms: Training Or Instruction

There is a controversy over the use of the term “training.” Some authors prefer the term “instruction,” “education,” or “development.” The rejection of the term is due to the fact that “training” can be taken as the imposition of behaviors that must be rigorously repeated. In this analysis, the term instruction will be used.

1.2 What Does Instruction In Learning Strategies Consist Of

Benson, 1995 defines it as an “area of methodology where students are motivated to focus on their learning.” Kinoshita, 2003 defines it as “an approach to guide students towards the efficient use of learning strategies while learning a second language or a foreign language.”

According to Oxford (1990), the best strategy instruction involves teaching not only language learning strategies but also relates to feelings and attitudes regarding taking greater responsibility and the change in role implied by the use of these strategies.

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Strategy instruction can cover more general aspects of language learning, such as the functions of language

used inside and outside the classroom, the importance of individual and group work, the relationships between accuracy and fluency, fear of errors, learning versus acquisition, and how language learning differs from learning other subjects. The goal of instruction is then to help students become more aware of the ways in which they learn most effectively, the ways in which they can improve their comprehension and production of the language being learned, and the ways in which they can continue learning outside the classroom.

1.3 Where Does The Interest In Instruction In Learning Strategies Arise From

In 1974, Leslie Dickinson suggested that teachers teach advanced students some of the techniques they used in their pedagogical practice so that students could take an active role in guiding their own learning. She stated that students who want to assume this role of autonomy undoubtedly need to be instructed in this

aspect. This author points out that two outstanding movements developed that promoted the instruction of learners in language learning.

The first movement developed from the work of Naiman, Frolich, Stern, and Todesco, 1978, and Rubin, 1981;

this movement proposed the adoption of an additional objective in language learning: acquiring effective learning strategies. They argued that if a learner is guided with the same strategies found in good learners, the efficiency of their learning can be improved.

In Great Britain, the proposal of language awareness instruction by Hawkins, 1984, emerged in the teaching of modern languages, which consisted of promoting the learner’s awareness regarding the nature of learning, the nature of communication, and the nature of language learning.

From that moment until now, numerous studies and investigations have been carried out on the incidence of strategy instruction in learning. In the field of second language teaching, most research has focused on direct instruction in reading strategies. In comparison, it could be said that few studies have been conducted regarding instruction to improve oral production.

2. Analysis Of Strategy Instruction

2.1 Points In Favor

- Students need to develop an awareness of the learning process and the strategies that lead to success (Chamot, 2000). Acquiring this conscious ability in self-directed learning and in the use of strategies can be achieved through instruction. Awareness of this self-directed learning is an important aspect in language learning, because if an acceptable level of communicative competence is to be achieved, one cannot wait for the teacher to teach everything (Oxford).
- If learners explore how, when, and why to use strategies, and evaluate and monitor their own learning, they can take a more active role in this process (Cohen, 1998).
- Students who are new to language learning may be less efficient in selecting and using their learning strategies and therefore need instruction in this area (O'Malley and Chamot, 1995 in Kinoshita, 2003).
- Learners need to be systematically educated in the skills and knowledge they will need to make well-founded choices about what they want to learn and how they want to do it (Nunan *et al*).
- Because teaching learning strategies to students ensures effective learning and fosters their independence (teaching them to learn how to learn).

Awareness of this self-directed learning is an important aspect in language learning

2.2 Points Against

- The generalized teaching of strategies does not take into account individual learning styles, therefore it cannot be expected that all students will use the same strategies.
- The value of strategies has not been proven and there is no evidence that they can be taught and are effective (Rees-Miller, in Benson, 1995).
- Instruction in strategies implies a shaping of the learner's behaviors to follow approved patterns of behavior. In this process, learners are evaluated by having to meet certain expectations, which, if not met, make them feel that they are poor language learners.
- Training establishes implicit limits on the range of behaviors and activities that can be seen as appropriate in terms of language learning, thus constructing a particular ideological position regarding what language learning is.
- The instruction of learners promotes only one type of autonomy, that which stems from an individualistic Western point of view. Likewise, it distances the learner from their role as a student as a real individual who lives, studies, and works in a real social context. The learner often appears to be a completely abstract individual with very few interests other than learning languages.

3. How To Instruct In Strategies

3.1 Aspects Of Instruction

3.1.1 Integrated Instruction Vs. Separate Instruction

One of the most debated issues is whether it is better to carry out strategy instruction integrated into the curriculum or separate from it.

Integrated instruction: the teacher introduces the teaching of strategies along with the normal content of the subject. Those who support this type of methodology argue that learning in context is more effective and

thus its immediate applicability becomes evident to the student, adding that practicing skills in academic tasks on the language being learned facilitates transfer to similar tasks found in other classes.

Separate instruction: a specific course focused on teaching strategies is taught. Currently, there are courses on teaching learning strategies outside the curriculum (so called workshops for learning how to learn). Those who are in favor of this type of instruction rely on the notion that all strategies are generalizable to many contexts and that students will learn them better if they focus their attention only on the strategies instead of dedicating themselves to content at the same time (Derry and Murphy 1986, Jones *et al.* 1987).

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However, one of the difficulties presented by these off-curriculum strategy learning methods is the risk that students will not connect them with their subjects. If so, the impact will be minimal.

Therefore, currently all experts agree that learning strategies can and should be taught as an integral part of the general curriculum, within school hours and in the context of each subject with the same content and activities carried out in the classroom.

3.1.2 Direct Instruction vs. Uninformed Instruction

Another aspect discussed in relation to instruction is whether it should be direct or uninformed. In direct instruction, students are informed about the value and purpose of teaching strategies and are helped to use, identify, and develop strategies in a systematic way.

In uninformed instruction, students work with activities and materials designed to elicit the use of specific strategies, but they are not informed about the reasons why this approach is being practiced. (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). The most common form of uninformed

strategy instruction is the instructions that appear in texts. For example: "Read the title of the text and list the ideas you think will be mentioned". An advantage of this type of instructional material is that it requires little instruction from the teacher (Jones, 1983). While students work on exercises and activities, they learn to use strategies through the clues given by the text.

However, some studies (Brown, Armbruster, and Baker, 1996) conducted on uninformed instruction showed that there is little transfer of what is instructed to new tasks. Since students are not aware of the strategies they are using, they will not develop independent learning strategies that allow them to increase their repertoire, which gives them little opportunity to become autonomous.

Later studies incorporated a metacognitive component into the instruction, informing students of the importance of the strategies being taught and providing them with instruction in their regulation and monitoring. This component has been useful for the learned strategies to be maintained over time and transferred to new tasks (Brown *et al.*, 1986).

3.2 PROPOSALS FOR STRATEGY INSTRUCTION

3.2.1 C.A.L.L.A (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach)

This instructional model was developed by Anna Chamot & O'Malley (1986) and can be considered one of the most representative in strategy instruction. It is designed to develop academic language skills in students with limited English proficiency (LEP).

The model consists of a five-step cycle that presents, teaches, practices, evaluates, and applies learning strategies. In this proposal, the instruction is very explicit when strategies are applied, gradually decreasing so that students begin to take greater responsibility in selecting and applying appropriate learning strategies. The cycle repeats when new strategies or new applications are added to the students' strategy repertoire. The steps in this sequence are:

Preparation: The purpose of this phase is to help students identify the strategies they are already using and to develop their metacognitive awareness of the existing relationships between their mental processes and effective learning. By identifying students' prior knowledge and their current use of learning strategies, teachers can diagnose students' needs regarding instruction in learning strategies.

Activities:

- Class discussions on strategies applied in recent tasks.
- Individual or group interviews on strategies used in particular tasks.
- Think-aloud sessions where students describe their processes while working on a task.
- Questionnaires about the use of strategies employed. And journal entries on how language learning is approached.

Presentation: In this phase, the learning strategy or strategies are explained and modeled. The teacher informs students about the characteristics, usefulness, and applications of the strategy to be taught. An ideal way to fulfill this purpose could be for the teacher to model the use of a personal strategy.

Activity:

The teacher can think aloud while reading a text about the process they are undertaking to understand the text:

- Predictions based on the title.
- Use of illustrations to bring prior knowledge about the topic.
- Special attention given to titles and highlighted texts.
- Monitoring comprehension and making decisions about what to do with words.

- Unfamiliar structures and ideas.
- Evaluating success in text comprehension.

The teacher can ask students to state the strategies they observed, and then describe the strategies, give a specific name to each, and explain when they can be used most effectively.

Practice: In this phase, students have the opportunity to practice the learning strategy with an authentic task. Practice is carried out during collaborative work with peers. Strategies can be practiced with a content or language task.

Activities:

A group of students can read a story, then describe the images in the story, discuss unknown words and infer meaning through context clues, and finally take turns summarizing the main points of the story.

Evaluation: The purpose of this phase is to provide students with opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of their use of learning strategies. In this way, they develop metacognitive awareness of their learning processes.

Activities:

- Discussions after practice.
- Learning logs in which students record the results of applying strategies.
- Lists of strategies employed.
- Open-ended questionnaires in which students can express their opinions regarding the usefulness of specific strategies.

Expansion: In this phase, students make decisions about the strategies they consider most effective, apply them to new contexts in other classes and in English classes, and develop their individual combinations and interpretations of learning strategies. Upon reaching this stage, the objective of the instruction has been achieved. Students have learned to apply strategies

independently and are capable of reflecting on and regulating their own learning.

Explanation of the CALLA framework

This process can be summarized through the analogy of building a structure from its foundations. First, the bases are laid (preparing students for the strategies), then scaffolding is put in place to support the ongoing construction (presenting the strategies and guiding students during their practice). When the building is constructed, it can stand on its own, so the scaffolding is gradually removed (less explicit and less supervised instruction as students begin to use strategies more independently and extend their use to other areas). But even when the building can stand on its own, it sometimes needs maintenance and repair (evaluation of strategies, instruction, and review of initial phases).

The second diagram illustrates that there is a progression from teacher direction towards student independence, which develops gradually, although all steps can occur in the same class.

3.2.2 Rebeca Oxford's Proposal (1990)

This proposal assumes that the diagnosis of the strategies students use is already known. The model consists of eight steps. The first five comprise the planning and preparation stage, while the remaining three constitute the part of guiding, evaluating, and reviewing instruction.

1. Determine student needs and available time:

The initial step involves analyzing who the students are and what their needs are. The teacher must consider age, English proficiency level, strengths, and weaknesses. Based on the strategy evaluation, it should be taken into account which strategies learners have been using and which ones they need. Additionally, it is necessary to set the time that will be dedicated to instruction and when it will take place. This will allow knowing if there is enough time to work without any pressure.

2. Select strategies well:

For strategy selection, the most important thing is to consider the results obtained from the previously conducted diagnosis. More than one type of strategy should be chosen to be taught, and it is also essential to consider those strategies that are of general use and can be easily transferred to a variety of situations and tasks. Another important aspect is the difficulty level of the strategies. Neither only easy strategies nor only very difficult ones should be taught.

3. Consider integrated strategy instruction:

Oxford is in favor of integrated instruction. Therefore, she suggests integrating instruction into the tasks, objectives, and materials used in regular classes. This way, students will better understand how strategies are used in a meaningful context. It is also important to teach students how to transfer strategies to new tasks in other contexts.

4. Consider motivational aspects:

The teacher should decide how to incentivize students who master new strategies. They can use grades or simply assume that students are motivated solely by the fact of becoming more effective in their learning. One way to motivate them is to allow them to participate in the selection of activities or tasks to be used or the strategies to be employed.

The teacher must also be sensitive to the original preferences of some students regarding strategies, as these may be due to cultural factors. The presentation of new strategies should not be avoided, but it is possible to gradually transition from the strategies the student already managed to new ones.

5. Prepare materials and activities:

Materials for strategy instruction should be special. The teacher can design manuals indicating when and how to develop the strategies they want to focus on. It is recommended to design a manual that students can

take home, and students can even be encouraged to design their own. Additionally, they can be allowed to select materials and activities.

6. Conduct fully direct instruction:

Oxford emphasizes that students should be informed as much as possible about why strategies are important and how they can be used in new situations. It is necessary to provide opportunities for practice in a wide variety of tasks and clearly indicate how strategies can be transferred from one task to another.

Spaces should also be created where students can explicitly evaluate the success of applying new strategies.

7. Evaluate strategy instruction:

Student feedback regarding strategy evaluation should be part of the strategy instruction program. This self-evaluation will provide the practice students need to self-monitor learning and evaluate the success of strategy management, and it will also give the teacher important data. Teacher observations during and after instruction are useful for evaluating how successful the instruction program was. Criteria for evaluation could include: improvement in task performance, improvement in general skills, the use of a new strategy over time, the transfer of strategies to other deserving tasks, and improvement in attitudes toward learning.

8. Review strategy instruction:

It is very likely that the evaluation stage will lead to a review of the material and procedures, which will again lead to the first step of reconsidering the needs and characteristics of the students who have been involved in the instruction.

4. Conclusions

Considering the research done on L2 strategy instruction, the following can be concluded:

Strategy instruction allows students to become aware of their effective learning methods, which leads them

to adopt independent study habits and, therefore, to achieve autonomy in their learning process.

- L2 strategy instruction should be based on students' attitudes, beliefs, and needs.

- Strategies should be chosen in a way that they can be integrated with each other and support each other. This way, they can be adjusted to the requirements of language learning tasks, students' goals, and their learning styles.

- Instruction should be integrated, as much as possible, into regular L2 learning activities and for a considerable time, instead of being taught separately and with very short interventions.

- Many opportunities for strategy instruction should be provided during the classes of the language being learned.

- Affective aspects such as anxiety, motivation, beliefs, and interest - which influence strategy choice - should be taken into account in learning strategy instruction.

Strategy instruction should be explicit and provide many opportunities for practice with a wide variety of tasks involving authentic materials.

- Instruction should not be limited to the class being taught at a given moment. Such instruction should guide the use of strategies that can be transferred to future tasks beyond the classroom.

- Instruction should somehow be individualized, as each student prefers or needs certain strategies for specific tasks.-Instruction in strategies should provide students with a mechanism for them to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction and the value of strategies in the multiple tasks they perform.

- It is important for teachers to receive instruction on how strategy instruction can be incorporated into the classroom. Teachers need a lot of exposure to the concept of strategies, a lot of practice in designing and delivering strategy instruction before they feel comfortable implementing them in the classroom.

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