

TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

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Abstract: *in the past few years there has been a growing pressure on both teachers and students to prove, show and “certify” what they are able to do. There has been a growing concern for productivity, for the returns that school work can bring in. The emphasis seems to shift more and more towards competence - what you can do - and towards performance - showing that you can do it. In a way, this has resulted in a shift of attention away from the how - how you achieve that competence, the process you have to go through, and also what schools and teachers can do to make learning possible and rewarding for all students.*

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By learning strategies we mean any action which you may have to take to solve a problem in learning, to help you make the most of your learning process, to speed up and optimize your cognitive, affective or social behaviour.

On the one hand, strategies play a cognitive role in learning, because they facilitate and optimize processes, especially in new tasks, where one cannot rely on routine, automatic behaviour; in tasks which require or allow conscious thinking and accuracy (for example, in a writing task); and when one is faced with problems or is experiencing difficulties (for instance, when one does not know a particular word and is forced to resort to a synonym, a general word or a paraphrase) [1];

On the other hand, strategies play an affective-motivational role in learning, because they are tools in the learners' hand, tools that they can use on their own and which can give them the feeling that they can do something to solve their problems and do better. This is what we mean when we say, in rather technical terms, that strategies promote the restructuring of causal attributions: if learners know that they can do something to achieve success in learning, they are less likely to attribute their success or failure to bad luck or poor ability. They can start thinking in a more positive way, they can start thinking that success can be in their hands if they make an effort and use the right strategies. In this way they are also increasing their sense of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and expectations of success – they are empowering themselves. It is as if they said to themselves: “Now I know the rules of the game. I can try harder, play better and maybe win” [2].

Learning strategies belong to the learner

That learning strategies belong to the learner, and should be kept distinct from teaching strategies, may seem obvious, even banal, but in fact most of the time teachers are the source of strategies, they hold them in store for students and seem to “dispense” them when they think it appropriate. Textbooks are often full of strategies, but students rarely spot them as learning strategies, let alone think that learning strategies, as the term says, should belong to them. How often do teachers prompt students to use inference to deduce the meaning of unknown words? How often do they prompt learners not to stop when they meet a problem in reading or listening, but to go on and make hypotheses? And yet, just leave students alone, and they will often fail to use those very strategies if teachers are not there to prompt them. Just give students a different task, and they will fail to transfer the strategies. Just let time pass ... and strategy training will melt as ice in the sun [2].

We need tasks that prompt the use of strategies

We should start from tasks, not from strategies. This seems obvious, but the tendency in teaching practices and teaching materials has been to focus not on actual learner strategies (that is, what students really do when they try to solve problems), but rather on what teachers, researchers and materials writers have identified as general categories of “good” strategies [3]. So we talk about classification strategies, planning strategies, communication strategies, and so on. We can rely on rather exhaustive lists and taxonomies of strategies, but we often forget that these categories, lists and taxonomies are the result of generalizations: they have been processed and neatly rearranged to serve as the basis for research studies, for syllabuses and for developing materials, but they do not reflect what learners actually do in the context of actual tasks while trying to solve actual problems. So if we take a set of strategies, for example, association strategies for vocabulary development, or inference strategies for text comprehension, and set out to teach them, we run the risk of believing that what we are teaching is really what students would be doing in real contexts. But things do not work exactly in that way. Research has repeatedly shown that the choice of strategies depends on a number of factors, including the language being learned, the level of proficiency, the learning goals, and the learner's characteristics, such as age, sex, learning style, beliefs and motivations [4]. Strategies should become part of selected classroom discourse

We have just shown that promoting strategy use is really a matter of investigating what works best for individual learners in the context of particular tasks. Teaching learning strategies is not teaching in the traditional

sense. We select a specific task that lends itself particularly well to strategy work because it poses a problem. Then we set students to work on the task, and, as they work through it, or just after they have finished working on it, we sort of "weave in" a moment of reflection and discussion on the strategies that they have used - or perhaps not used. When we say "weave in", we really mean integrating this discussion within classroom discourse, within what we and our students actually say when we are together, working on the same task [5]. When we interact, we are not just speakers or listeners: in the same way, when we are working on strategies, we are exchanging information, thoughts and feelings - students presenting their strategies and us weaving in our own strategies, discussing and negotiating possible ways of approaching the problems posed by the task. If we look at things like this, we can start viewing the question of time in a different way. One of the most frequent reservations and even criticisms about strategies instruction is that it takes time, and time is at a premium today. But if we view strategy work as part of our normal, routine interaction with students, then it is mainly a question of checking the results of a task not just in terms of right or wrong answers (the "product"), but also in terms of the strategies used ("the process"). This will not necessarily take much time - a few minutes here and there may be enough, if this becomes part of our systematic way of dealing with tasks. Of course, it is part of our job as teachers to select the most appropriate tasks and the most appropriate moments to "weave in" this thread of strategic work; it is a question of selecting and evaluating times and circumstances.

In general learning strategies are essential components of a curriculum, as bridges between competence and process. In the light of this belief, in this paper we have argued that an approach to strategies education should be explicit, experiential, embedded and evaluative - what we call the "4E approach". Such an approach seems to be promising in that it offers [6]:

- *task-based value - because strategies are first and foremost applied to specific language tasks;*
- *skills-based value - because strategies can be developed across language skills and communicative activities;*
- *cross-curricular value - because strategies can be made to overflow through the watertight compartments of school subjects; and, last but not least;*
- *lifelong learning value - because strategies can be part of our effort to equip students with learning tools for the rest of their lives.*

References

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