

# Can Learning Strategies Be Taught in Classroom?

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## 摘 要

自 1970 年以來，外語教學的焦點，已由語言教學法轉移至學習者和學習策略。其主要目的在幫助語言學習者解決語言學習問題，並讓學習者因而能成為快速有效且成功的語言學習者。

在外語教學研究領域裡有多位學者，如 Naiman, O' Malley, Oxford, Rubin, Stern 等，一致給予語言學習策略極高評價。筆者站在第一線實際參與外語教學工作的立場，探討語言學習策略是否誠如諸位先進所言，能成為外語學習者的萬靈丹，並同時探討外語教師是否能在課堂上講授此萬靈丹。

本文將學習策略相關文獻及研究報告加以分析，並與筆者實際教學情況相互比較和探討，評估語言教師是否能將此語言學習策略納入課程教授範圍。

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss whether learning strategies can be taught in foreign language classroom or not. I will first review the related literature—(1) what are good language learning strategies? (2) An overview of the studies of language learning strategies. Then I will discuss the studies and compare various practical situations. Finally I will suggest that language teachers teach some learning strategies in their classroom.

Keywords: LS (learning strategy), LLS (language learning strategy), ESL (English as a second language), EFL (English as a foreign language), FLT (foreign language teaching), FLL (foreign language learning).

## 1. Introduction

Perhaps a majority of teachers always bear in mind — what can I do to help my students become confident and efficient in their learning? When they ask themselves this question, they try to find the answers through a variety of means — the use of one method or another, or through combinations of methods in their teaching. Chamot (1987:71) has pointed out: “If learning is to take place, it usually involves the collaboration of two people -- a teacher and a learner.” This means teachers cannot leave their students alone in learning alone and students may also find the difficulties of learning on their own overwhelming. However, most Chinese learners believe that they can learn English simply by

speaking to native speakers. It is true that learning language does require to expose in a communicative context. Many linguists, EFL researchers and educators indicate that students acquire competence to use language naturally or in a communicative way. As an EFL teacher, I agree with that, but the problem is that EFL students do not have enough opportunities outside the classroom because there is no English-speaking environment in their local community. Moreover, this type of communicative competence is not sufficient for students to successfully learn English in their mainstream curriculum. They also need to develop academic competence, because in our higher education, most textbooks are written in English. Thus, they need English not only for communication but other for skills as well.

As it is known that since the early 1970s, the attention of studies on the field of language learning and teaching has shifted from the methods of language teaching to learners and learning strategies. The aim of this change is to try to help language learners solve their learning problems and become fast, effective and successful learners.

Researchers of the field of language teaching and learning strongly recommend that learning strategies of successful language learners can assist L2 learners gain their target language. Therefore, it can be interpreted that less successful language learners can improve their L2 proficiency through using the successful language learners' strategies. As mentioned above, teachers would like to apply anything helpful to learning to his/her teaching methods. Before applying any new methods to teaching, teachers should understand what it is, and carefully evaluate it and ask him/herself "can it be used to teach my students?"

In the following section of this essay I will review the following questions in the literature (1) what are good language learning strategies? (2) An overview of the studies of language learning strategies, then a discussion of the studies and a comparison with the practical situation, and finally, a judgment whether learning strategies can be taught by ESL or EFL teachers.

## **2. Review of the Related Literature of Learning Strategies**

### **2.1 Good language learning strategies**

Generally speaking, the early research of language learning strategies focused on the strategies of successful language learners, with the intention of teaching these strategies to less successful learners (e.g. Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975; Naiman et.al.1978). What are the strategies of successful language learners? Rubin, Stern and Naiman provided lists of strategies used by successful language learners. Rubin (1975) suggested that such learners demonstrate the following characteristics: being a willing and accurate guesser; having a strong, persevering drive to communicate; often being uninhibited and willing to make mistakes in order to learn or communicate; focusing on form by looking for patterns; taking advantage of all practice opportunities; monitoring his or her own speech as well as that of others; and paying attention to meaning. Meanwhile, Stern (1975: 316) concluded that a good language learner used the following strategies to cope with problems in L2 language acquisition and to attain L2 language competence.

1. A personal learning style or positive learning strategies.
2. An active approach to the learning task.
3. A tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language and empathy with its speakers.
4. Technical know-how about how to tackle a language
5. Strategies of experimentation and planning with the object of developing the new language into an ordered system and of revising this system progressively.
6. Constantly searching for meaning.
7. Willingness to practice.
8. Willingness to use the language in real communication.
9. Self-monitoring and critical sensitivity to language use.
10. Developing the target language more and more as a separate reference system and learning to think in it.

In the above studies, the strategies of the good language learner are described as their personal characteristics, styles and strategies. They did not include the learners' mental processes—e.g. perceiving, analyzing, classifying, relating, storing, retrieving, and constructing a language output. Later studies (e.g. Rubin 1981) discovered more specific characteristics of good language learners, who are seen to actively involve themselves in the language learning process such as: they find ways to overcome obstacles, whether linguistic, affective or environmental; they monitored their own performance; they studied, practiced, and involved themselves in communication. Naiman et al. (1978) defined learning strategies as "find a learning style that suits you; involve yourself in the language learning process; develop an awareness of language both as system and as communication; pay constant attention to expanding your language knowledge; develop the L2 as a separate system; take into account the demand that L2 learning imposes".

Is there any difference between characteristics of good language learners' learning and learning strategies? O' Malley et al. (1985) and Rubin (1987) defined learning strategies as operations or plans used by the learner to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information. Oxford (1990) expands this definition by saying that "learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situation" (p.8). The O' Malley et al and Rubin's definition focuses on cognitive aspects of learning strategies. Oxford's includes the emotional and social aspects of language learning. In brief, language-learning strategies are steps taken by the learner to enhance his or her own progress in learning L2 or other language (Oxford, 1989a). In contrast with the previous view of the characteristics of good language learners' learning, learning strategies are used in a broad sense.

O' Malley and Chamot (1996) have carried out the extensive research in learning strategies. They indicate an overall model of L2 learning based on cognitive psychology. There are three main types of strategies used by L2:

1. Cognitive strategies involve conscious ways of tackling language, such as note taking, resourcing (using dictionaries and other resources), and elaboration (relating new

information to old).

2. Metacognitive strategies involve planning and thinking about learning such as planning one's learning, monitoring one's own speech or writing, and how well one has done.
3. Social strategies mean learning by interacting with others, such as working with fellow student or asking the teacher's help.

## 2.2 Studies of learning strategy training

Much research in second language acquisition has been devoted to discovering what good language learners do and how their learning strategies can be taught to less successful learners in order to improve their learning efficiency. The learning strategy training attempts to translate the theory behind learner training into practice. The following is to review the training studies in order to evaluate whether they can be taught in EFL class.

Henmer-Stanchina (1982) cited in McDonough (2000) Learner Strategies conducted an experiment to train university-level ESL listening strategies. The result showed that they can be successfully taught to students how to use guessing and self-correction to improve listening comprehension.

O' Malley et al. (1985) used combination strategies--metacognitive, cognitive and socioaffective strategies to train Asian and Hispanic ESL students' speaking and listening skills to investigate whether the strategies would facilitate their ESL learning. The result showed that speaking is effected but not listening. This study also found that Hispanic students benefited from LLS training, but Asian students preferred their own established learning strategies. This supports the ethnic differences in strategy use found by Politzer (1983).

In their study of training and use of learning strategies for ESL in a military context, Russo and Stewner-Mazanares (1985) report that soldiers who are taught selective attention, guessing, question for clarification, self-evaluation and functional plan gain remarkable results. The training was consisted of listening and speaking activities for 6 hours over a five-day period.

Chamot & Kupper (1989) conducted high school LLS training and they observed that students were taught selective attention and inferencing in listening and self-evaluation and cooperation strategies in speaking. They found that success of LLS training depended on teacher interest and his instructional techniques and ability to motivate students to try new strategies.

Sutter (1989) cited in McDonough (2000) Learner Strategies trained Refugees LLS in Danish language learning. He found that ethnic and personal preferences were related to the degree of success of LLS training. At the same time, he found the longer students spent in a particular language program, the more they tended to value its teaching practice.

In a recent study, the impact of strategy training on a group of 55 EFL learners at the University of Minnesota conducted by Chen et al. (1996) cited in McDonough (2000) Learner Strategies found that the experimental group outperformed in speaking after the explicit instruction in strategies training.

Another successful training in Hong Kong reported by Nunan (1997) incorporated the learning strategy into the curriculum to develop students' academic writing and speaking skills. The aim of the study was to investigate the effect of learner strategy training on learner motivation and also on the knowledge, use and perceived utility of the strategies. The strategies taught were: predicting, confirming, reflecting, self-evaluating, cooperating, summarizing, memorizing, inductive and deductive learning, learning skills, applying, classifying and personalizing and developing independent strategies. The student used them in and outside the classroom during a one-semester training program. The result shows it had a significant effect on student motivation and on students' knowledge of strategies and their appreciation of the use of strategies in their language learning. But on use of the strategies it is less clear. However, the motivation and the knowledge of strategies can help students take control of their own learning.

Summing up the above studies of learning strategy trainings, each training seems to have its significant effects. O' Malley and Chamot (1996) had an overview of the strategy training, and found that more effective learners differed from less effective ones in their use of strategies. Meanwhile, they also found that students who were instructed by their teachers as more effective learners use strategies more frequently, and use a greater variety of strategies. Moreover, Oxford (1995) and Nunan (1995) also give learning strategy training a high value. They concluded from their study that active use strategies help students attain higher proficiency. Nunan (1995) found that the good learner strategies, e.g. self-monitoring and critical sensitivity to language use, enable students to make greater connections between English classes and content courses conducted in English. Furthermore, Nunan's 1997 study evidenced that strategy training not only develops learner's academic writing and speaking skills but also provides independence in their learning.

### **3. A Discussion of the findings of learning strategies training**

In reviewing the above studies, we can assume that learning strategies are teachable and most of them can develop learning efficiency. However, there are still a few questions that need to be explicit before adopting the methods in EFL class.

Firstly, researchers who do not teach EFL classes themselves conducted most of the above studies. Although they know the theory, it does not mean they know how to apply it in a practical situation. Furthermore, the studies are small-scale and in a short-term training, excluding Nunan's (1997) study.

It is unclear whether the learning strategies were adopted and continued by the students after the training course. Under these considerations, a question should be raised: Is it worthwhile dividing a very limited class hour, e.g. in my school only 3 hours a week, to teach these strategies? If the teacher decides to teach them in his/her class, he/she should consider what learning strategies should be taught--All of the strategies or some of them? particular one or two of them? Should he/she separate a class hour to teach the strategies or should the strategies be incorporated into normal teaching hours?

As mentioned, there are many different classifications of good learner learning strategies from Rubin (1975) to Naiman et al. (1978). What is a criterion of universal learning strategies? Moreover,

how can a teacher present the techniques such as the awareness of factors, many of which undermine learning, and have a tolerant and empathic attitude? Another is how can the teacher teach the strategies such as being active in the learning process or seeing the target language as a system? Are they concepts, strategies, or behaviors? Can they be taught or trained in a short period time like a few days in the above LLS training programs? Furthermore in cognitive learning strategies such as seeking meaning, using deduction, inferencing or monitoring, can they be specified in terms of observable, specific, universal behaviors that could be taught to or assessed in learners.

Secondly, as Vann and Abraham (1990) and Porte's (1988) discovered in their case studies, even though unsuccessful learners employed many good language learning strategies, they still cannot be led to success in their learning tasks. Naiman et al. (1978) also found that students identified as successful learners used strategies e.g. reading aloud, reading a dictionary, following rules given in grammar books, word-by-word translation, which are not approved by the good language learner model and strongly disapproved of by ESL teachers. Therefore, a teacher should consider that all good language learners' learning strategies are not universal before he/she exerts his/her efforts. Are there any universal techniques that can fit to the different modes of language processing?

Thirdly, the ethnic differences should be taken into account as the O'Malley et al. (1985) found that Hispanic students benefited from LLS training, but Asian students did not because Asian students preferred their own established strategies. In this case how can a teacher handle a heterogeneous class?

#### **4. Conclusion**

There might be several factors that are problematic in teaching learning strategies to EFL learners. A more thorough analysis of the above studies and the techniques of training students using strategies would perhaps discourage EFL teachers from adopting such strategies as a corner-stone of their teaching and students' language learning, even though the researchers are highly respected in the field and the studies show that learning strategies do affect ESL or EFL learning efficiency.

Truly an EFL teacher should bear the responsibility of developing students' best potential; however, there is no panacea in every aspect of strategies either in teaching or learning. Although there are still several problematic issues that should be overcome, I would suggest that the teacher try to teach one or two strategies every class to give his/her students another useful tool in their language learning. If he/she considers the factors involved in the learning process such ethnic background, belief, students' style and individual learning style, he/she should introduce those strategies most appropriate to his/her students. This kind of input can not only encourage students to adopt some learning strategies, which they need to help them learn a foreign language fast and effectively but also provide students to use different learning strategies at different time of their language stage in their life.

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