English in

Specific Settings

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Strategy Training in ESP Acquisition Processes: Some Criteria

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Introduction

Training learners in the use of learning strategies (LS) is the final step in the process of dealing with LS as a path towards a second language acquisition. After having identified which are the relevant strategies used by a given group of *good learners* (Rubin 1975) with a specific goal, a program is needed so as to implement these strategies into the learning process of less effective learners. Questions arise then of whether less effective learners can learn to use strategies and what instructional approach can be used to teach the strategies selected (O'Malley & Chamot 1990).

Second Language Acquisition and Learning Strategies

Since the early seventies, there has been a shift in the field of second language learning and teaching in what concerns the methods of teaching and their possible influence on the process of acquiring a second language.

For those who are not familiar with learning strategies, it should be said that these are *operations, processes* or *behaviours* performed by a learner to facilitate the acquisition, storage or retrieval of information related to his or her learning (O'Malley & Chamot 1990). It has been acknowledged by many linguists that language processing strategies exist and influence second language acquisition (Ellis 1985). It seems obvious that in any SLA process, learners receive an input in L2, then relate it to their knowledge in L1 and build up their own acquisition process. In this learner's internal process, interlanguage phenomena (Selinker 1976) can be found, in what respects L2 production and reception, errors, and all kinds of strategies that the learner develops. Examples of learning strategies can be: repeating a phrase to remember it, listening to a TV program, comparing a grammatical rule in L1 with its corresponding one in L2, etc.

Learning strategies were identified as such for the first time and then systematised by Rubin (1975) and Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978), upon realising that several *good learners* used particular strategies

to acquire English in certain learning situations. Later on, the Cognitive Psychology validated the existence and use of these strategies, showing in this way that they support cognitive mental processes which are necessary for learning a language (Anderson 1983, 1985).

As Wenden (1987) suggests, the theoretical impetus to examine how learners approach the task of learning a second language can be attributed to a changing view on the nature of mind put forward by the theory and research in the field of cognitive science, or, as Hunt (1982: 193) puts it: "a discipline devoted to exploring how our minds work." For some cognitive scientists this means a study of problem solving and formal logical reasoning. For others, it includes everything that goes on in the mind between input and output, i.e., perception, memory, learning, inference, concept formation, etc.

One of the most relevant studies performed in this field was to identify learning strategies within a theoretical framework on how to process information, carried out by Brown & Palincsar in 1982. A threefold taxonomy of learning strategies resulted from this, consisting of:

(a) **Metacognitive Strategies**, which are those that help to think about the learning process. They process and plan information, and later on help to self-evaluate the result of the learning activity.

(b) **Cognitive Strategies**, being directly related to the individual tasks of the learning process. They manipulate or transform learning materials, organizing and elaborating them.

(c) **Socio-Affective Strategies**, which deal with the learning process in cooperation with other learners, helping each other in the acquisition of a specific skill.

Instruction in Learning Strategies and Implications for ESP Courses

It is assumed by most researchers that good language learners use a variety of strategies to help them in gaining command over new language skills. This implies that less competent learners should be able to improve their skills in a second language through training on strategies used by successful language learners (Rubin 1975; Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco 1978).

In our English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs, teachers can play an important role in this training by applying strategies and supporting student efforts to learn the new language specificity. Due to several reasons such as the low number of hours our ESP courses have, or the importance that some skills entail, like vocabulary acquisition or reading

comprehension, implementing a syllabus where learning strategies are incorporated should be of a great importance.

Before viewing the characteristics that an instruction program in learning strategies should have, we could draw a first conclusion saying that to be self-sufficient and effective in ESP language courses, learners must know how to learn. This is not a new idea in the field of second language learning. Nevertheless, as Wenden (1987: 159) suggests, learner instruction remains a secondary concern in many second language classes.

Following Wenden, this lack of emphasis on instruction in learner strategies may be due in part to the little empirical validation it has received up to now in second language learning. It may also be due to the lack of guidelines to direct a more systematic approach in finding materials and activities for its implementation.

Criteria for a Training Program in LS Instruction

The first unresolved issue is that of whether instruction should only focus on LS instruction or should be integrated with classroom instruction in the language or content subject (O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 153). Thus, the first question deals with separate versus integrated instruction. Some authors claim that strategies are generalizable to many contexts (Derry and Murphy 1986; Jones, Palincsar, Ogle & Carr 1987) and so, separate training programs should have a better instruction performance.

On the other hand, those in favour of integrated instruction programs (Wenden 1987) argue that the training in learning will always be tied to a language learning experience; especially for learners who do not immediately appreciate the relevance of learner training: the more integrated the learner training, the more effective it should be. Also, practicing strategies on authentic academic tasks facilitates the transfer of strategies to similar tasks (Campione & Armbruster 1985). Weinstein & Underwood (1985) have developed and implemented both separate and integrated instruction in learning strategies. A special university course is designed to teach students how to use learning strategies effectively, and then practice is provided by applying these strategies to students' other courses (reported by O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 168).

The second question is that of direct versus embedded instruction. Wenden (1987: 159) calls this question explicitness of purpose, i.e., should students be informed of the value and purposes of the training or not? Studies have shown that embedded training results in improved performance of the task to which it is tied. However, ordinarily, students do not continue

to use the strategy, that is, there is neither maintenance nor transfer to similar situations. On the other hand, direct or informed training tells students that a strategy can be helpful and why (Wenden 1987: 160). The addition of this metacognitive component has been helpful in maintaining strategy use over time and transfer to new tasks (O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 169). Therefore, many researchers recommend that instruction in LS be direct rather than embedded.

A conclusion to these questions could be drawn, which may be tentative guidelines for ESP teachers wishing to provide students with systematic training in learning how to learn:

(1) Students should be informed of the value and significance of the strategies you train them to use.

(2) Training should be provided on both cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

A third question, equally relevant, is raised by Wenden (1987: 161): evaluation, i.e., how is the outcome of learner training measured? The changes in learner's behaviour looked for should include task improvement, maintenance and transfer of the learning strategies. Task improvement means determining whether learners perform their language tasks with greater facility and accuracy as a result of the training. Maintenance has to do with durability of behaviour. Finally, transfer considers the learners' ability to generalize the use of the strategy to similar classes of tasks within different contexts.

Additional Issues of an Instruction Program in LS

- **Teacher Training in LS**. In almost every serious attempt to establish strategy training models (Derry & Murphy 1986; Holec 1987; Wenden 1987) the role of teacher training is avoided or remains unclear. In other studies (Cohen & Aphek 1981; Hosenfeld, Arnold, Kirchofer, Laciura & Wilson 1981) teachers are viewed as observers but do not take an active participation in the training program, since it is researchers who carry them out. Yet there is a need not only to train teachers in methods of incorporating strategy instruction in their classrooms but also to convince teachers that learning strategies can be effective for their students (O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 155). Jones, Palincsar, Ogle and Carr (1987) propose that teachers should be trained to help in the process of LS instruction. They view a "strategic teacher" as thinking and making

decisions about the variables of the instructional process, content to be learned, assessment, and development of strategy instruction.

- **Student Characteristics**. A series of difficulties may appear from the side of student characteristics when trying to implement an instructional program. Motivation is probably the most important factor to bear in mind. It can be considered a component of metacognition since it plays a self-regulatory role in learning (Jones, Palincsar, Ogle & Carr 1987: 142). Learning strategy instruction would be most valuable for students who are not successful learners. However, these are the very students who may be least motivated to try new strategies, for the lack of motivation their previous failures in learning may have given them. Paris (1988: 8) claims that a motivational training component needs to be added to learning strategy instructional programs. Aptitude is another student characteristic which influences an instruction program. Carroll (1981: 89) presents four major components of foreign language aptitude:

  (1) Phonetic coding ability: an ability to identify distinct sounds and to form associations.
  (2) Grammatical sensitivity: the ability to recognize the grammatical functions of words.
  (3) Rote learning ability for foreign language materials: the ability to learn associations between sounds and meanings.
  (4) Inductive language learning ability: the ability to infer or induce the rules governing a set of language materials.

It might be then possible that the link between aptitude and effective learning strategy use is a strong one (O'Malley & Chamot 1990: 161).

The third student characteristic is learning style, or the way in which an individual prefers to learn (Kolb 1984: 112). Since a student's learning style may predispose his or her choice of strategies, some instructional programs recommend that teachers include activities that address the needs of students' different learning styles (McCarthy 1987: 37). Also, students may need additional assistance in those strategies that are not close to their learning style but which are valuable.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper learning strategies have been described, as well as the need to implement training programs which may help to improve English language acquisition in our ESP classes. Major issues involved in training of

learning strategies have also been identified, such as whether instruction should be a separate course or integrated with a regular class. Most researchers agree that instruction should probably be integrated, in order to demonstrate to students how strategies should be applied and to make sure that strategies will be transferred to new tasks.

In addition, students should be made aware of the strategies they are being taught and of the goals of strategy instruction. This is believed to facilitate transfer of the strategies to new tasks and to help students towards autonomy in the use of strategies. Outcome in the use of strategies should also be measured through evaluation of task improvement, maintenance and transfer of the learning strategies.

Finally, other minor issues such as teacher training and student characteristics should also be included in the design of a training program in learning strategies.

It is needless to say that, in order to implement learning strategy instruction in our ESP classes, teachers are a fundamental part. Since learning strategies are a part of procedural knowledge, their acquisition would require a considerable investment of time. The only way to provide for such extended instruction would be to involve regular classroom teachers in the teaching of learning strategies, who should probably need extensive support from researchers. Researchers and teachers altogether would very likely represent the best team to successfully implement a program of learning strategy instruction in our ESP classes.

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