Strategic Learning (vs. Learning Strategies)
by [Dudley Reynolds]

Language learning and use strategies are an integral part of many textbooks and teachers' lessons today: Students have to write a question based on a reading's title before they start reading; while in speech classes, everyone has to create a visual aid to promote comprehensibility. Teaching students specific strategies they can use to better comprehend, communicate in, or remember a new language without a doubt helps them become more effective language learners. When teaching strategies, however, we need to remember that the emphasis should not be strategy learning so much as strategic learning.

Cohen defines language learning strategies as "thoughts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks" (2011, p. 7). The key word here is "consciously." We may hope that students will make a strategy automatic behavior, but in the beginning strategies are deliberate steps students take in order to learn or communicate better. That means we need to get them thinking about how they are learning and using language. Here are four tips for teaching strategic learning.

Find Units of Learning in Language Experiences

Activities, tasks, projects, tests, and assignments all have clear goals and parameters that make it easier to evaluate students' learning and also to help them understand where they were and were not successful. In short, they allow us—the teachers—to talk about learning.

Opportunities to learn language do not end with the classroom, however. Students use the Internet outside of class, watch subtitled movies, and have to make sense of the manual for a product they just bought. They may not see these experiences as learning opportunities, however.

Students need to see their interactions with language inside and outside of the classroom in the way that teachers do—as units of activity with endpoints and objectives and performance criteria.

To develop that ability, we need to ask questions like:

- Why are we doing this activity?
- What do you think would impress me in this paper?
- What should you already know how to do on this test? What will be more difficult?
- Can you name something you do outside of class where you use English? How do you know if you are doing it well?

Build Strategy Repertoires

Early research on children memorizing sequences showed that some students had more effective techniques than others and that children with less effective procedures could be taught to improve (Pressley & Harris, 2006). We don't all solve mental challenges the same way, and often what we need to improve our process is to hear about other ways.

Consider asking students to complete a survey like the Language Strategy Use Inventory developed by Andrew Cohen and Julie Chi for the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota. Such inventories typically cover a range of contexts and language uses and are useful for showing learners that they can be more deliberate about their learning.

Learners also need focused exposure to choices they have with a single task. Model your thought process for figuring out a blog writer's opinion on an issue. Highlight strategies you use, like breaking the article into sections before reading, making inferences from pictures, and keying in on evaluative language. You can also put students in pairs where one student is the doer of the task and the other an observer/recorder. The doer has to explain what she is thinking as she solves the task; the observer has to take notes and report back first to the doer and then the class.

Finally, encourage students to think about performing a task in their first language. Ask them about something that is hard to read, then what steps they follow when reading it, how they use pictures, and what kind of notes they take.

Strategize

If students are aware that language tasks can be accomplished in different ways, then they are ready to strategize. Consider students in a speaking class assigned to give a 3-minute oral presentation on British culture. Some may simply say, "OK, I'll surf the Internet until I find something to talk about." More strategic students, however, will see the classroom task as a series of subtasks that begin with identifying a topic, finding sources, planning the talk, creating visual support, and practicing.

Imagine that the strategic student has selected Morris dancing as a topic and now wants to find sources. She identifies goals (e.g., number of sources needed, criteria for source quality, comprehensibility of sources) and parameters (e.g., time available, limitations related to bandwidth, access to a printer or alternatives for saving information). She remembers first the Morris dancing in the London Olympics closing ceremonies and the dancers' costumes. She then reads the entry on Wikipedia. She remembers that a past teacher told her information from Wikipedia needed to be verified by other sources. She thinks about the type of Internet site that might be useful. She chooses YouTube and looks for videos with titles like "What is Morris Dancing?" because she wants a video with written text as well as visual demonstrations. By adopting a strategic approach to her search, she finds quality information that supports her comprehension in a reasonable amount of time.

Strategic thinking does not come automatically. If we want to help students improve their oral presentations, for example, we have to talk about not only about what makes a good presentation, but also the process for preparing for a presentation. They need to compare their processes, evaluate each other, and consider alternatives.

Model Learning

Strategic learning is a hot topic for researchers today because it puts the emphasis on the process for learning and the need to teach students to be self-regulating (Gao, 2007; Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). When we teach—that is, when we explain topics,

set goals and parameters for tasks, provide feedback, and evaluate performance—we are not only facilitating learning, we are modeling it. We are providing paradigms that students can adopt and adapt.

This means that we should balance discussions of what we're learning (e.g., "verb tenses") with discussions of how we learn (e.g., "figuring out the right verb tense requires memorizing a closed set of forms and then being able to identify contextual signals that determine which form to choose; where should we look for those signals?"). We also need to help students develop criteria for evaluating learning that extend beyond mastery, such as how quickly the answer was reached, how certain we are of the answer, and whether we still remember it tomorrow.

Finally, we need to teach them to be flexible and forgiving. Let them know that trial and error is good as long as the trials are principled and the errors provide information for next time.

References

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