

STRATEGY TRAINING

For ESL Students and All Language Learners

by Elizabeth J. Noseworthy

As an itinerant ESL teacher in the 1990s, I often wondered how I could possibly address all the language needs of my students. How could I teach them all the words they needed to know? How could I teach them the grammar needed to understand and write increasingly sophisticated texts? Thanks to Chomsky and a few other language experts I had studied, I knew that all people have a natural ability to learn language, or languages, under the right circumstances. I saw young children painlessly pick up language in the playground and classroom and some even academically surpassed their native English speaking peers. However, I still wondered how the adolescent students could ever catch up with a moving target? Obviously I couldn't teach them all the English that an average teenager has or needs.

The answer was found in learning strategies! Instead of focussing on teaching words, for example, I focussed on teaching students how to learn words and how to read for understanding. I began teaching simple strategies early on, strategies such as looking at the pictures to gain meaning, as we teach kindergarten children. As students progressed I introduced other strategies that required more critical and analytical thinking, ways to hone in on and consolidate important ideas while reading, and the value of recycling language and ideas. Before I took a student's name off the ESL service delivery list, after four to five years of ESL support services, I tried to ensure that the student had a range of learning strategies for continued, independent language learning.

At this point, let me add the caveat that application of learning strategies can only be effective if the materials and language level the student engages with are appropriate to the student's readiness level. As with all learners, ESL students need reading materials and aural input that they can learn from, texts that are in their zone of proximal development. For instance, there will be limited success if a student with a primary or elementary reading level tries to apply reading strategies to most high school print materials. Likewise, the language a student hears needs to be matched to the student's listening comprehension and processing level. All students benefit from clear and precise aural input and wait time to process language.

In the mid 1980s, O'Malley and Chamot developed the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), a content based ESL model for intermediate to advanced students as a "bridge to the mainstream" (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Content and language are developed together through a focus on and application of language learning strategies. The strategies outlined by CALLA are relevant to all students, native and non-native English speakers. The authors later recommended that the approach be used in mainstream classrooms with all students (Chamot and O'Malley, 1996). Ideally, the ESL specialist will work in collaboration with the classroom teacher to deliver strategy training in an inclusive environment.

All students in an English school are English language learners and many excel in language skills, but others, such as struggling readers and ESL students, lag behind their peers. Strategy training, which includes the more language able students reflecting on and sharing how they learn, is beneficial to all students. While some students unconsciously use good learning strategies, others need to be explicitly taught strategies. For example, language learners need to know that they can often guess the meaning of words in context or that sometimes it doesn't matter if you don't know every word. Students can learn to analyse language and discover patterns that will give a clue to meaning, or identify parts of words. ESL students can explore grammatical structures and then try them out in journal writing. All students can improve comprehension while reading by stopping periodically to paraphrase or summarize (orally, in writing or mentally). The tell-yourself strategy recycles ideas and language, expands thoughts and consolidates learning.

All teachers are literacy teachers and can help students develop strategies for success. Science and social studies teachers can teach reading comprehension strategies such as studying and understanding the maps, diagrams and other graphics in a text before tackling the printed word. All students can gain from previewing to understand how a chapter of a text book is put together, the logic and meaning of the titles and subtitles. Students can gain from discrete vocabulary knowledge such as the fact that biology, biodegradable and bionic all have something in common. Fortunately the days of standing in front of students and telling them what's in the book are coming to a close. Students need to be literate, reading, talking about and recording information for themselves. Active students use a range of strategies to discover, synthesize and make connections to what they already know; in other words, learn.

Rebecca Oxford (2002) categorizes learning strategies into six groups: affective, social, metacognitive, memory related, general cognitive and compensatory. I would add that students also need to know the difference between survival strategies and learning strategies—strategies that will help them develop skills and independence in the long run. Constantly asking, How do you spell...? or What does ...mean? are survival strategies that have little or no long term benefit. Translations, over dependence on dictionaries, and avoidance tactics, or accommodations that allow avoidance, do little to promote language learning. These techniques likely detract from learning. Learning requires thinking—exercising the brain—and all students can and need to exercise the brain.

It is important that teachers assure success. Strategies need to be modelled and applied to texts and situations within the student's readiness zone. The intentional and successful application of learning strategies heightens the student's confidence and interest in learning. As students move away from survival strategies and begin to depend on their own skills and knowledge, their engagement in learning grows.

Teachers also need to recognize the impact affective and social factors have on language development and learning in general. These include a positive attitude toward reading, confidence in public speaking or expressing opinions and ideas in cooperative learning situations. Involvement in activities such as drama or choir are language learning strategies. All students, but especially second language learners, can benefit from successful experiences, and positive feedback in language activities. And, most importantly, activities and texts need to be manageable, interesting, and relevant to the student to encourage confidence and the best strategy of all—meaningful practice.

So, as an itinerant ESL teacher, I gradually shifted my focus from teaching English to teaching students how to acquire English through successful engagement in content. As students reached an intermediate to advanced level of English, strategies were taught and practised using textbooks and resources from the students' regular program, thereby killing two birds with one stone and making the connection between ESL services and mainstream success.

There is no end to the strategies for learning. Students themselves can often offer techniques for improved learning that even the teachers hadn't thought of. For a variety of strategies, see O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), and the Newfoundland and Labrador provincial document *ESL Strategies for Advanced Learners in Grades 4-12*, available online. An Internet search for ESL learning strategies, reading strategies or something similar will turn up a wealth of ideas.

References

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