

## **Restructuring Academic Curriculum and Delivery towards Functional Education: the role of Strategy Training**

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**Abstract:** *In restructuring academic curriculum and delivery towards functional education, strategy training should be integrated into language curriculum. Language learning strategies is a term referring to the processes and actions that are consciously deployed to help language learners learn or use a language more effectively. Instructional materials should be developed to target best strategies which are essential for success in learning a second language. There are various forms of content-directed learning strategies. In addition, risk-taking and individualized strategies is also vital. A number of variables are to be considered in assessing students' use of learning strategies. Factors that affect the use of language learning strategy (LLS), such as role of beliefs, social and cultural background, motivation, attitude, personality, etc., must be well studied to find their interaction with strategy use. Further research in this challenging area is critical to the development of teacher training and students' instruction in order to base these components on firm theoretical and empirical foundations. Developing and utilizing the best practices in language learning will enable students enjoy the process, maximize their language learning potential, and develop a positive attitude towards the training.*

**Key Words:** *Curriculum, Learning strategy, Effective teaching, Cultural competence*

### **Introduction**

Language learning strategies, a concept that has been vaguely defined and controversially classified, continues to attract the attention of contemporary and would-be educators because of its potential to enhance language learning. A key to understanding effective language learning techniques lies in studying the behavioral pattern of successful language learners and extrapolating from it. Successful language learners have a passionate yearning to communicate. They pay attention to form and meaning in their language. They practice and monitor their own

language and the language of those around them. They spend more time interacting during class time, and are constantly involved in the affairs of their colleagues and classmates. This behavior is consistent with a strong desire to communicate. Additionally, they are able to adapt to different learning styles, participate actively in the language learning process and develop an astute consciousness of language both as a system of rules and as a means of communication. Unhesitatingly, applied research propounds two major goals for language learning strategies (Chamot, 2001) (Ching, 2002).

- i. Language learning strategies aims to identify learning techniques used by successful language learners and make useful comparisons with those of less successful learners of the language.
- ii. They also aim to provide specific instruction that aid language learners in their language study.

### **Kinds of Strategies**

There are several major strategies organization strategies for learning language. In addition, there are other modifying techniques for learning language, which include risk-taking (Cervantes, 2013). Personality and socio-cultural, individual traits, and student-teacher relationships also influence language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014).

### **Organization strategies**

There are several, yet often interrelated organization language learning strategies. These strategies can be broadly classified into six categories (Oxford & Cohen, 1992).

- i. **Memory strategies:** This strategy, achieved through using words in sentences and frequently reviewing lessons and regular practice. It helps learners remember, store and retrieve new information when needed.
- ii. **Cognitive strategies:** These are strategies that help learners understand and produce new language through critical analysis, and deductive reasoning and summarizing.
- iii. **Social strategies:** They help learners interact, communicate, cooperate, and empathize with others to maximize learning (e.g. developing cultural understanding and cooperating with others).
- iv. **Metacognitive strategies:** These strategies help learners control their own cognition and enable them maximize their learning experience through planning, monitoring their language use, coordinating the language process, and availing themselves of opportunities to use the language.
- v. **Affective strategies:** These strategies are of primary benefit in helping learners reduce anxiety, increase their motivation, and control their emotions. An example would be a learner discussing their feelings with others, or listening to music in order to lower anxiety.
- vi. **Compensatory strategies:** Also referred to as cover strategies, they are those strategies that learners use to create the impression that they have control over material when they do not. They are a special type of compensatory or coping strategies whereby an appearance of language proficiency and ability is created. For example, a student using a

memorized but not well-understood phrase in an utterance during classroom drills. The learner's motive in utilizing these coping strategies does not involve a desire to learn any language material, nor even to engage in genuine language. Some cover strategies reflect efforts at simplification (Peacock & Ho, 2003).

### Comparing organizational strategies

It is widely believed that language learning strategies are teachable and that learners benefit from coaching. Many researchers have demonstrated pedagogical applications from studies in language learning strategies – (Oxford, 1990) (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014). One such study conducted by Tang and Moore (1992) highlights the effects of teaching of cognitive and metacognitive strategies on reading comprehension in the classroom. They concluded that cognitive strategy instruction improved comprehension scores, but the improvement was not sustained following withdrawal of the treatment. Conversely, metacognitive strategy also led to improvements in comprehension ability that was maintained beyond the end of treatment. This finding resonates that of O'Malley et al (1985) who discovered that higher level students demonstrate greater capability than lower level students in exercising metacognitive control over their learning.

In another study, students were randomly assigned to one of three instructional groups where they received training in (1) metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies, (2) cognitive and socioaffective strategies, or (3) no special instruction in language learning strategies (control group) for listening, speaking and vocabulary acquisition skills. (O'Malley, 1987) In this study, greater effectiveness of language learning was not achieved after the strategy instruction was applied. Despite the mixed result of this research, the hypothesis that some of the success achieved by good language learners may be the result of more effective language learning strategies remains appealing. Also interesting is the hypothesis that the language learning strategies of the more successful students may be learned by the less successful students, and that teachers assist the language learning process by promoting language learning strategy awareness and use (Porte, 1988). The probability that language learning strategies can be taught is increasingly attracting the attention of contemporary educators, and researchers keen to harness the potential which language learning strategies have in enhancing an individual's ability to learn language (Green, 1995).

Attaining the second major goal of strategic literacy initiative requires that readers need to be conversant with Reading Process Analysis (RPA). This is important because RPA helps readers become more aware of the demands of different texts and strategies to meet the demands of making meaning as they read. Through sharing experiences and reflections of individual reading processes in a group, readers learn from each other and appropriate new strategies. Reading, once perceived as a complex activity, is enhanced through the flexible applications of

many strategies. This is often an important new awareness for many readers, and a process that bears repetition, especially as readers encounter different types of text (Goldenberg, 2008).

A number of variables are expected in this pursuit of helping less efficient readers, and requires expertise in the following areas:

- (a) Teachers' use of classroom-based assessment to inform instructional planning in reading
- (b) Specific interventions for learners with severe reading disabilities
- (c) A cognitive neuroscientific approach to early development of reading skills.
- (d) Periodic assessment to ensure continuous growth
- (e) Reading assessment based on specified curricula
- (f) Phonological and alphabetic interventions in lower classes
- (g) Test accommodations for students with disabilities
- (h) Large scale testing
- (i) The design of instructional strategies in reading for students with diverse learning and curricular needs, and
- (j) Content and performance standards in reading throughout the junior secondary schools. (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Simmons, 2004)

### **Risk-taking Strategies**

The study of second language learning has been the subject of considerable exploration for many years. Basically, risk-taking behavior refers to a "developmental trait that consists of moving toward something without thinking of the consequences" (Alshalabi, 2003, p. 22). Language learners, then, engage in the act of taking risks simply by learning a second language because they are changing established linguistic patterns for other unfamiliar ones. Learning a foreign language employs the use of several tools and technical skills, which enable more vibrant interpersonal exchanges across and among cultures. This often involves forming a hypothesis, testing the hypothesis, and analyzing relevant information before arriving at conclusions. Allowing students to take risks is essential to their leaning. Students are encouraged to advance their basic communicative skills, which lies at the heart of effective communication: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Knowledge of other cultures and understanding differences in expression also help students temper their communication, about the problems they endeavor to solve (Asemota, 2012).

Innate risk taking can be enhanced through learning strategies that seek to enable students to acquire cultural and language proficiency through their normal reading experiences (Cervantes, 2013). This involves teachers providing students with authentic tasks. To realize this goal, students require the necessary opportunities, prompts, and reassurance to practice acquired skills outside of the classroom context. Identifying these opportunities can be done during class time and when the strategies are likely to be useful for work done outside of the class. For

example, any written report requires that students determine what is needed in the material they read for the report.

### **Personality and socio-cultural influence on language acquisition**

Addressing cultural and literacy needs of students requires that language tutors need first be aware of the influence of their own culture. Emphasizing the relevance of developing cultural competency, Rosen (2000) suggests that “self-knowledge can be gained through an inquiry into cultural consciousness so that teachers will discover the assumptions and stereotypes which create obstacles to culturally responsive teaching” (p.254). The emphasis is for teachers to evaluate their own ideals concerning languages and other dialects besides Standard English, and to measure their contribution as English Language Arts teachers in the success of students from various cultural backgrounds (Alptekin, 1984). Importantly, a teacher’s cultural background, language ability, social interests, goals, cognitions, and values, especially if different from their students, could significantly influence student interest, participation and understanding (National Institute for Literacy: Partnership for Reading, 2006). Teachers can overcome cultural barriers and become more culturally competent by reflecting on their self-knowledge and by learning to acknowledge and respect their students’ language, literacy, literature and cultural backgrounds different from theirs.

There are other factors that influence Language Learning Strategy (LLS) such as role of beliefs – such as beliefs about differences among learners, how they learn, learning preferences and other individual interests (Anderson, 2007). Research shows that many of the emotional or social difficulties that students experience reduce when the educational climates are adapted to their level and pace of learning. Differentiation in education may indicate students’ mastery of particular concepts, whether in form of a role play, through a research paper, diagram, or poster. Ultimately, the goal is to understand the students and allow them the opportunities for self-expression and creativity, in order to showcase what they have learned and how it could be applied to addressing specific needs. (Carol Ann Tomlinson’s study – as cited by Ellis, Gable, Greg & Rock, 2008).

The following are specific examples of how personality, attitude, socio-cultural background influence language acquisition:

- **Cultural Knowledge**

Reading comprehension enable learners to effectively connect previously acquired knowledge with the newly acquired knowledge contained in written texts. Previously acquired knowledge, in turn, largely depends on past experience. Familiar topics are discussed and cultural differences are uncovered. Naturally, it would be expected that the experiences of children from different

backgrounds will differ, for example children from rural backgrounds and those from urbanized communities. Having experience with diverse cultural backgrounds facilitates understanding and appreciation of written text. For instance, understanding jokes and humor in texts depend on shared cultural knowledge between the writer and the reader (Gee, 2001).

- **Attitude towards Learning**

The process of education involves two main roles including ‘teaching’ by the teacher, and ‘learning’ by the student. The attitude of students towards learning is of primary importance as it affects the quality of education that proceeds from them (Park et al, 2012). Renninger, Hidi, & Krapp (2014) stress the role of emotional and psychological factors in determining the attitude of students to learning new concepts. The attitude of students towards learning in turn determines how much attention is paid to instructional material within the classroom setting and how much learning the student is able to do on his or her own (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Baikie (2002) proposed that students’ inability to understand what is being taught in class stems from lack of sufficient time allocated for reading and studying, often resulting in poor quality education. Another growing problem resulting in low quality education is the problem of indiscipline, the seeds of which are often the result of parental upbringing. This is often at times compounded by the teacher who may at times be unwilling to correct the child.

- **Motivation and Purpose**

Motivation affects the way a person reads and correlates strongly with a person’s purpose for reading. It affects the way a book is read. To illustrate this point, consider the way a dictionary is read and the way a novel is read; we often read both books differently. Understanding the needs and yearnings of students enables teachers to effectively motivate their students, thereby inspiring a sense of purpose and meaning in the reading activity. This could have far reaching effect on the lives of the students and how much they are able to gain from the learning activity (Turner & Paris, 1995).

### **Development of teacher training and student instruction**

Teaching is a very special relationship shared between the teacher and the student with the primary responsibility of engaging the students in the process of learning. It typically involves multidimensional activities in which the skill of the teacher is often tested through his ability to juggle and multitask simultaneously and flexibly. Some of the principles that make teaching a more effective and efficient process are highlighted below:



- i. Effective teaching requires that teachers get to know and understand their students, their yearnings and aspirations, and using that knowledge to inform course design and classroom teaching. It is known that individual student characteristics can significantly affect learning. For instance, their cultural and generational backgrounds influence their perception of the world (Rosen, 2000). Their disciplinary backgrounds also influence the way students are likely to approach and deal with different situations. Also important is their personal experience and how much previously acquired information they have (Sinclair, 1995), both accurate and inaccurate aspects, as this potentially shapes their new learning experience. Understanding how each student relates with the entire learning process is important for effective teaching and exchange between the teacher and the student (Rosen, 2000). While it may not be possible to obtain or accurately measure all the cultural and background differences in all students, collecting the most essential information early in course planning is key, and a continued effort should be made to obtain other relevant information as the semester progresses. Ultimately, the benefits of this process are evident in:
  - a. Course design and planning in order to meet goals and aspirations of students.
  - b. Understanding student difficulties and addressing them in more timely and effective manner.
  - c. Adapting instructional materials to meet the needs and individual requirements of students.
- ii. Effective teaching incorporates three vital and essential components: learning objectives, instructional activities and assessments and/or evaluation. Paying attention to each of these saves time and improves the learning process (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1999). Teaching is more effective and student learning is enhanced through (a) articulating clear goals and learning objectives helps teachers and students to have an indication of the knowledge and skills they are expected to demonstrate by the end of the course; (b) the various instructional activities including case demonstrations, discussions, labs, and readings, help students to arrive at their stated objectives through direct supervision and by providing goal-oriented practice; and (c) regular and periodic assessments in the form of tests, term papers, quizzes, or problem sets provide an objective way to estimate how much of the required knowledge and skills have been imbibed by students in line with the articulated objectives, and also avails the teacher the opportunity for targeted feedback that can guide further learning (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005).
- iii. Effective teaching involves making the requirements for each course clear to students in line with their learning objectives. Considering the wide variation in what is expected of students across courses and even within a given discipline, a clear definition early on in

terms what constitutes good performance is necessary so that the predetermined set of objectives can be reasonably accomplished (Turner & Paris, 1995).

- iv. Effective teaching involves a step by step approach in order to effectively deliver the message across to students. Students, without sufficient background information and experience may require more time and effort in developing important skills. They need instructors who are able to simplify complex tasks and delineate the component parts, assist in making relevant connections, and offer logical and detailed explanation of concepts (Ellis, Gable, Gregg, & Rock, 2008). Effective teaching requires that teachers are able to identify and explicitly communicate to students the knowledge and skills that they need to acquire, in order to gain proficiency and expertise in the subject (Goldenberg, 2008).
- v. Effective teaching involves an adaptation of the teaching roles to support learning goals. Ultimately, students are responsible for their own learning, and their accomplishments depend to a large extent on how far they are willing to go and how much sacrifice they are willing to make. The role that the teacher assumes as instructor is critical in helping to guide the students' thinking and behavior (Anderson, 2007). Whether as moderator, commentator, or facilitator, the role the teacher adopts during the teaching process should be based on the learning objectives, as well as the expected outcome of the student's learning. For example, if the learning objective seeks to make students develop skills in critical analysis and arguments from a case or written text, the teacher could adopt the role of a moderator or facilitator to help frame, guide and moderate the discussion. Depending on the primary outcome expected, the teacher's role might necessitate a great deal of flexibility in order to get students to actively participate in the learning process and to embrace varying alternative perspectives and insights (National Institute for Literacy: Partnership for Reading, 2006).
- vi. Additionally, effective teaching involves progressively modifying and refining course content and methodology based on objective and regular feedback. The teaching process and methodology should not be static; it requires a constant adaptation to be able to address pertinent concerns and incorporate changes where necessary. Teachers need to continually reflect on their teaching approach, and be ready to make modifications when appropriate. The drivers for knowing what and how to change may coin from current and emerging issues in the field. Appraisal of teaching effectiveness may be obtained from direct student feedback, or through assessment of students' performance and course evaluations, as well as dynamics of class participation (Haager, & Windmueller, 2001). Information garnered based on such data, should be employed in modifying learning



objectives, content, structure or format of a course as such changes driven by feedback and priorities are most likely to be manageable and effective.

### Conclusion and Recommendation:

By installing language strategies in the curriculum, professionals could make a solid claim that academic curriculum has been restructured, and an indestructible ladder of language delivery been laid towards aesthetic, effective, critical, and functional education, where the language of the text would match students' proficiency level. Besides linguistic skills, students would be in positions to attain background knowledge to fully comprehend literary text, which students apply in their daily act of communication (Asemota, 2012).

In spite of the fact that learning strategies are highly regarded and recommended as fundamental learning tools (O'Malley, 1985), it is essential that teachers should have realistic expectations. It should be borne in mind that these strategies, regardless of where or how efficiently they are employed, are unlikely to solve all existing language learning problems. Not infrequently, many teachers today combine heterogeneity of techniques and principles derived from a variety of methods in a carefully reasoned manner. It must be remembered that regardless of teacher preference, language strategies if used in conjunction with other existing techniques, the effect may be additive and it may quickly become an indispensable component to a language learner's tool kit.

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