

# Chapter 1

## Teaching Language Learning Strategies

In this chapter we provide a rationale for teaching students learning strategies in general and at the college level.

### *I. A Rationale for Teaching Learning Strategies*

The explicit teaching of learning strategies can aid language teachers in helping students attain the goals of improving their mastery of the target language and of learning about the target culture.

Learning strategies are the thoughts and actions we engage in, consciously or not, to learn new information. The goal of teaching learning strategies is to help students to consciously control how they learn so that they can be efficient, motivated, and independent language learners (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999).

The intent of learning strategies instruction is to help all students become better language learners. When students begin to understand their own learning processes and can exert some control over these processes, they tend to take more responsibility for their own learning. This self-knowledge and skill in regulating one's own learning is a characteristic of successful learners, including successful language learners. Research with both first and second language learners is revealing some of the ways of thinking that guide and assist an individual's attempts to learn more effectively (Paris & Winograd, 1990).

Students who think and work strategically are more motivated to learn and have a higher sense of self-efficacy or confidence in their own learning ability. That is, strategic students perceive themselves as more able to succeed academically than students who do not know how to use strategies effectively. Students who expect to be successful at a learning task generally are successful, and each successful learning experience increases motivation.

In order to continue to be successful with learning tasks, students need to be aware of the strategies that led to their success. Awareness of one's own thinking processes is generally referred to as *metacognition* or *metacognitive awareness* (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Rivers, 2001). The value of this type of self-knowledge is that it leads to reflection, to planning how to proceed with a learning task, to monitoring one's own performance on an ongoing basis, and to self-evaluation upon task completion. In other words, it leads to self-regulation of one's learning. Students with greater metacognitive awareness understand the similarity between the current learning task and previous ones, know the strategies required for successful learning, and anticipate success as a result of knowing "how to learn."

One study that investigated differences between more and less effective language learners focused on listening comprehension (O'Malley, Chamot, and Küpper, 1989). Significant differences

in strategy use were found between effective and less effective listeners in three major areas. Effective listeners (1) monitored their comprehension by continually asking themselves if what they were hearing made sense; (2) related new information to their prior knowledge by recalling relevant personal experiences or things they had studied; and (3) made inferences about unknown words or information.

Similar research with both high school and college foreign language students found differences between more and less effective learners in the number and range of strategies used, in how the strategies were used, and in whether they were appropriate for the task (Anderson, 1991; Bruen, 2001; Chamot, 1993; Fan, 2003; Green & Oxford, 1995; Halbach, 2000).

These studies indicate that task difficulty and level of language proficiency have a major effect on the strategies that students use. For example, some strategies used by beginning level effective language learners are used less often by the same learners when they reach intermediate level classes, probably because they have had to develop new strategies to meet the requirements of more challenging language tasks. In addition, the difficulty of the task seems to be related to whether students even try to use learning strategies. For example, if a task is relatively easy, students can perform it much as they would in their native language, without conscious attention to strategies. On the other hand, if the task is much too difficult, even effective learning strategies cannot overcome the learner's lack of knowledge and/or language proficiency.

Conclusions about strategic differences between successful and unsuccessful language learners suggest that explicit knowledge about the characteristics of a task and about appropriate strategies for the task's completion are major determiners of language learning effectiveness. When students do not understand a task (what they are supposed to do) and cannot choose an appropriate strategy to help them understand and complete the task, they seem to fall back on a largely implicit approach to learning in which they use habitual or preferred strategies without analyzing the requirements of the particular task.

If successful language learners know how to use learning strategies to assist their language performance, can teachers help less effective language learners by teaching them how to use some of the same effective strategies?

In fact, researchers and teachers in native language contexts have been quite successful in improving student performance through learning strategies instruction in areas such as reading comprehension, writing, and problem-solving (see, for example, El-Dinary, Brown, and Van Meter, 1995; Gagné, Yekovitch, and Yekovitch, 1993; Harris and Graham, 1992; Wood, Woloshyn, and Willoughby, 1995).

Second-language researchers have also investigated a variety of language learning tasks, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing. While much additional research remains to be done with language learning strategies, many of the studies carried out to date report that instruction in learning strategies can, if properly conducted, help students increase their language learning ability and confidence (see, for example, Ross and Rost, 1991; Thompson and Rubin, 1993).

Studies with high school and college learners of Japanese, Russian, or Spanish indicated generally strong correlations between the use of language learning strategies and students' level of confidence in their own language learning ability (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, Carbonaro, and Robbins, 1993). Research currently in progress is building on these studies of foreign language learning strategies by fine-tuning teaching techniques for integrating instruction in language learning strategies into the foreign language curriculum.

General models for language learning strategies instruction for all levels of instruction have been developed for teachers of foreign languages and English as a second or foreign language (Chamot et al, 1999; Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990). For an overview of lists of language learning strategies, see Hsiao and Oxford, 2002).

Below you will find a summary of the reasons for teaching learning strategies in the foreign language classroom.

**Important reasons for teaching learning strategies  
in the foreign language classroom include the following:**

- Strategic differences between more and less effective learners have been documented through research in both first and second language contexts. Better learners have greater metacognitive awareness, which helps them select appropriate strategies for a specific task.
- Most students can learn how to use learning strategies more effectively.
- Many strategies can be used for a variety of tasks, but most students need guidance in transferring a familiar strategy to new problems.
- Learning strategies instruction can increase student motivation in two main ways: by increasing students' confidence in their own learning ability and by providing students with specific techniques for successful language learning.
- Students who have learned how and when to use learning strategies become more self-reliant and better able to learn independently.

## ***II. Teaching Learning Strategies in Higher Education***

University-level language learning involves higher, more demanding skills and tasks such as reading a novel, analyzing a poem or story, listening to lectures, or writing a research paper. Learning strategies can help students meet these demands. For example, when faced with long-term assignments, students benefit from *planning* their time and *organizing* the assignment into small tasks.

In addition, students can share ideas and check their work by *cooperating* with classmates. Students can *use graphic organizers* to prepare for the assignment and present and/or illustrate the information efficiently. Finally, college-level language learners can use appropriate information sources such as references materials, models, and the Internet to complete difficult assignments and even take their work a step further.

Instructors expect students to work independently and be responsible for their own learning. Learners are therefore challenged to manage their language studies in a variety of ways. Strategic learning encourages students to take that responsibility and reflect on their own thinking process as well. For instance, learners who are aware of effective learning practices *monitor* their progress and evaluate their performance and achievement. Students who have a repertoire of strategies at their disposal can make sophisticated learning decisions.

Understanding the language learning process will encourage students' acquisition and critical analysis of language learning issues. Learning strategies instruction gives instructors and students the opportunity and vocabulary to talk about the learning process in the target language.

Extensive language learning resources are available to both instructors and learners at the university level. Traditional language labs have become multimedia centers that provide software and Internet practice. Teacher Assistant and peer tutoring opportunities are available in most language programs. Also, many language departments house target language libraries and reading rooms. Language clubs host films, speakers, and cultural outings. Lastly, foreign exchange programs allow students to experience the target culture and learn the language in immersion setting. Strategic learners can take advantage of these information and practice sources. Teaching students learning strategies will help encourage them to access and use varying educational opportunities.

In the following chapter, "Defining and Organizing Language Learning Strategies," you will be introduced to 20 useful learning strategies and be given suggestions on how to teach these strategies.