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Activities for Developing Learning Strategies

Establishing learning techniques in the ELT classroom

Rachael Harris

DELTA
Publishing

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Preface

The Delta Publishing Ideas in Action series aims to help teachers to relate specific areas of theory and research to their classroom practice. It aims to bridge the divide between these through explanation of the theory from a practitioner perspective, discussion of major research findings and linking both of these to example activities, strategies and suggestions for the classroom. Written by practising teachers and experienced materials writers, Ideas in Action titles show that theory and practice can come together to make English language learning both effective and enjoyable for all.

One of the key goals that many of us have as language teachers is to develop our learners' autonomy – their ability to study and learn appropriately and effectively without our direct guidance. By doing so we give them the skills not just to attain their immediate goals, but also to know how to confront, prepare for and work towards future goals, both in their language learning and wider careers and lives. There is a substantial body of research on learning strategies indicating that not only are these strategies teachable, but also that they improve learner efficacy, self-confidence and motivation to learn English (e.g., Oxford, 1993, 2011). Importantly, there is also research on the efficacy of different learning strategies, which indicates that many of students' most commonly used strategies aren't always the most effective (see, e.g., Dunlosky et al., 2013). And yet, there are, to date, very few books that make this research both accessible and usable for teachers – a clear gap that the Ideas in Action series was made for!

For this reason, I am very happy to introduce this important addition to the Delta Publishing Ideas in Action series. **Activities for Developing Learning Strategies** provides over 30 activities that teachers can use immediately in their own classrooms to develop learners' abilities to learn effectively and enjoyably. All the activities are accompanied by an accessible Rationale and clear procedure. Importantly, Rachael has also added a wealth of ideas to each unit for both Differentiation and Extension, ensuring that all of us can tailor the activities proposed to our own classrooms.

Rachael's Introduction chapter offers an accessible, 'jargon-busting' introduction to the topic to enable us to understand what has been established by research and what the implications for our classrooms are. The microstrategies (Chapter 1) she proposes are particularly insightful and reveal her ever-present awareness of the needs of all learners in class, particularly those who may face greater challenges; this builds well on her contributions to another title in the series, **Activities for Inclusive Language Teaching**, that you may also want to dip into!

I look forward to trying out the tasks in **Activities for Developing Learning Strategies** in my own classroom, and thank the author heartily for her contribution to the Delta Publishing Ideas in Action series!

Jason Anderson
Series Editor: Ideas in Action

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0 Introduction

All too often students are told to learn something – a list of irregular verbs, today's vocabulary before next lesson etc., or we hear certain teachers talk in terms of “done”; as in “we’ve just done the present perfect”. The assumption is that this “learn” or “done” means that our students will have assimilated all the knowledge necessary to be able to know when and how to correctly reproduce this target language item when needed. For some people this learning business is easy, they seem to know something the minute they are first introduced to it, we talk about photographic memories for example, or people who are just “good at languages”. However, others struggle, not only through school, but also later in life. Even among adult learners, some simply “catch on” much quicker than others.

What if it was, in fact, a question of learning strategies? What if some learners had adopted successful learning strategies early in their school life and continued to use them efficiently, while others plodded on, without these strategies, believing instead that they were not as intelligent, or just not made for school? Research has shown that this could well be the case. O'Malley et al. (1985) found that higher level students use more strategies and more sophisticated strategies, while Jones et al. (1987) discovered that the more successful and motivated the student, the more learning strategies they adopted in different areas of learning including planning and monitoring their learning. Even Dörnyei, who questioned the validity and existence of learning strategies, declared that training students to use them would be “highly desirable” (2006, p. 173) and would teach learners how to learn better.

Defining Learning Strategies

Who would have thought that an area such as Learning Strategy definition would be so complicated? Or that it would be so hotly debated? In her most recent book, Rebecca L. Oxford provides a four-page list of strategy definitions and their prototypical-definitional features (2018). Here are just a few:

“*(There is) no complete agreement on exactly what strategies are; how many strategies exist; how they should be defined, demarcated, and categorized; and whether it is – or ever will be – possible to create a real, scientifically validated hierarchy of strategies.*”
Rebecca L. Oxford (1990 p.17)

As different learners will use different strategies according to their preference and context, we may ask ourselves whether it is even useful to count how many possible strategies exist, and whether it is suitable to hierarchise them. The one that works best in a given situation will always be top of a learners' list.

“*Language Learning Strategies are mental actions or also observable behaviours, complex, dynamic, teachable and at least partially (or to start with) conscious and involve various self-regulatory functions*”
Rebecca L. Oxford (2019 p. xxiv)

There has been some debate over whether strategies are mental or behavioural. Oxford's research based on questionnaires led to an assumption that she saw strategies as mental, whereas Chamot's observation-based research saw a behavioural aspect to strategies. However, in my opinion, the argument over whether a mental (and therefore) non-observed action can be considered a purposeful action somewhat misses the

point, just as assuming a student highlighting a list of words is consciously memorising them, and not just decorating their vocabulary list!

” *Techniques which students use to comprehend, store and remember new information and skills.*

Chamot & Küpper (1989, p. 13)

“

This seems to me to be a useful, clear definition that explains the efficacy of using, and therefore the importance of teaching strategies.

” *Thoughts, cognitions, and other internal phenomena (...) actions, (what learners do); techniques, devices, tools, and methods, (what learners use); behaviours (how learners act)*

Rebecca L. Oxford (2017 p.20)

“

” *L2 LS are complex, dynamic thoughts and actions, selected and used by learners with some degree of consciousness in specific contexts in order to regulate multiple aspects of themselves (such as cognitive, emotional, and social) for the purpose of (a) accomplishing language tasks; (b) improving language performance or use; and/or (c) enhancing long-term proficiency. Strategies are mentally guided but may also have physical and therefore observable manifestations. Learners often use strategies flexibly and creatively; combine them in various ways, such as strategy clusters or strategy chains; and orchestrate them to meet learning needs. Strategies are teachable. Learners in their contexts decide which strategies to use. Appropriateness depends on multiple personal and contextual factors.*

Rebecca L. Oxford (2016, p. 48)

“

” *Learning strategies are conscious mental and behavioural procedures that people engage in with the aim to gain control over their learning process. Strategies can be cognitive (among which memory-related and compensatory strategies are important), metacognitive, social and affective. Strategy use appears to be greatly shaped by the curricular context and the specific tasks at hand.*

Ortega 2009 (in Understanding SLA)

“

These quotes and Oxford's meta-analysis (2016) lead us to conclude that strategies are techniques, devices, actions or thoughts that regulate, facilitate or make (more) successful learning or acquisition, through retention, retrieval or use of knowledge.

So, to collate and simplify the key features of all these definitions, we can say that language learning strategies are **actions or thought processes that students consciously choose to do to improve their learning and language communication.**

A brief history of Learning Strategies

The starting point of learning strategy research is typically seen to be a series of articles written in 1975, one by H.H. Stern entitled *What can we learn from the good language learner?* and another by Joan Rubin; *What the “Good Language Learner” can teach us*. These texts picked up on common traits shared by successful language learners such as the motivation to regularly use and be in contact with the target language, the ability to notice non-verbal clues such as mood, intonation and environment, use of circumlocution (finding a way to express yourself without using a particular word or lexical chunk you’ve forgotten), and finally using self-regulation to manage inhibitions. The idea is, that by picking out the strategies used by good learners and consciously teaching them, others can develop the same skills in their language learning.

Later, authors such as J. Michael O’Malley and Anna Uhl Chamot began researching learning strategies in more detail, and in 1990 Rebecca Oxford published *Language Learning Strategies – What every teacher should know* – which developed a framework of strategies known as the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) which was a questionnaire designed to assess students’ use of learning strategies, and became a starting point for strategy instruction, and much of the research that followed assessing the efficiency of this instruction. *The Learning Strategies Handbook*, by Chamot, published in 1999 went on to suggest activities for teachers wishing to include explicit strategy instruction in their lessons, as does Chamot and Harris’s more recent publication *Learning Strategy Instruction in the Language Classroom* (2019). However, much of the literature on learning strategies has tended to focus on three main areas – precise definitions, taxonomies (lists of strategies and frameworks) and whether they actually worked or not.

More recent studies have focused on specific language learning areas such as vocabulary acquisition, with Paul Nation (2001) suggesting various lexical learning strategies, or with work by Mirosław Pawlak on strategies for learning grammar presented through his grammar learning strategy inventory in 2013.

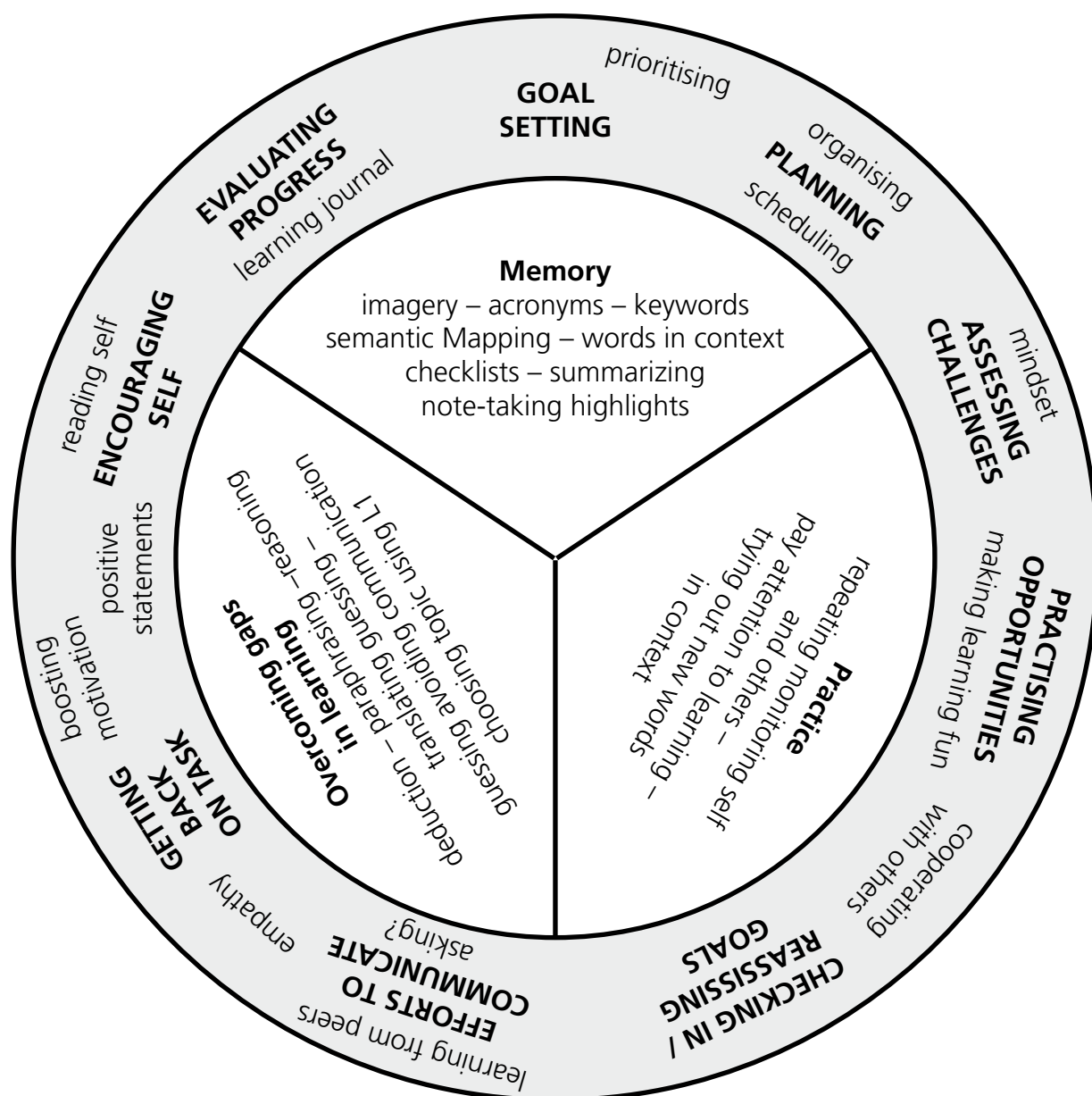
Language learning strategies fell out of fashion after being criticised by Zoltán Dörnyei in 2005 when he called into question the lack of clear definitions (for example, by including students’ thoughts as well as their visual behaviours). Later, research in learning strategies became less common and was overtaken by the overlapping field of self-regulation; which includes many of the learning strategies classified by Oxford (1990) as meta-cognitive; such as dealing with anxiety and self-motivation. However, this doesn’t mean the topic of language learning strategies has died away; there’s even a yearly international conference on Situating Strategy Use, and the concept of language learning strategies has a central place in the 2020 Norwegian national curriculum for English for example.

Classification of Learning Strategies

Over 100 strategies have been identified according to Chamot (1999) and there are many ways of organising them into groups. O’Malley and Chamot (1985) identified three groups; cognitive – which covers strategies for direct language learning, such as repetition, deduction, note-taking or using keywords, metacognitive – which includes strategies for planning and thinking about learning, including monitoring and evaluating language use, and finally socio-affective, which includes strategies linked to communicating with others, such as asking for help. Stern (1992) separates strategies into five sections; management and planning (which includes many of O’Malley’s metacognitive strategies) cognitive, communicative-experiential (including problem-solving strategies such as circumlocution or asking for explanations) interpersonal (including developing knowledge of target language culture), and affective (strategies for overcoming negative feelings evoked by language learning). In the second edition of *How to be a more successful language learner* (1994) Joan Rubin separates executive control and strategies, the former includes planning, monitoring and evaluating and revising, and the strategies include strategies for learning grammar and vocabulary as well as specific strategies for skills.

One of the most well-known was suggested by Rebecca L. Oxford (1990). She separates them into direct and indirect strategies, direct strategies are subdivided into memory, cognitive, compensation and indirect strategies are organised into metacognitive, affective, and social groups. These sections include a wide variety of strategies such as developing cultural understanding, setting goals or using non-linguistic clues. As we can see, many authors have separated strategies according to whether they pertain to learning in general, or to language use and learning in particular. Dörnyei (2005) also separates strategies into those designed for language learning and those designed for its use.

While you may feel too much detail may confuse your students, referring to the strategies suggested in the diagram below will ensure you don't overlook any areas in your strategy instruction. As you can see, the inner circle represents direct learning strategies that students should undertake to improve their language learning, while the outer circle represents strategies used to get students into a learning frame of mind and keep them there. Giving the students a copy of the diagram can help them answer the reflection questions many activities in this book refer to (see Chapter 1) and enable them to deliberate upon their own learning; metacognition has frequently been mentioned as an essential part of using learning strategies.



Are Learning Strategies effective?

Having seen first-hand the difference that explicitly teaching learning strategies can make, not just to the language level of a particular student, but much more importantly, to students' mindset and self-esteem, I would say absolutely!

However, I am obviously biased, so let's look at a little research. As early as 1987 Anna Chamot declared that "students identified as good language learners by teachers do use conscious learning strategies not only in ESL classrooms but also in out of classroom acquisition environments" (Wenden & Rubin, 1987). Despite criticising strategy research Zoltán Dörnyei said that strategies should be taught to students, and O'Malley et al. stated that higher level students used more, and more sophisticated strategies than classmates (cited in Cohen & Macaro 2007). Dunlosky's research into techniques for learning vocabulary showed that certain strategies, such as distributed practice or practice testing are very effective (see Chapter 6).

Although not all strategy research has provided positive results, some has been unclear, such as O'Malley's research presented in Wenden and Rubin (1987). However, O'Malley explains that this could be due to students persisting in familiar strategies rather than trying out new ones, and his questioning whether the students were given enough time to get used to the strategies tested. Indeed, Macaro (2006) claims that strategy instruction is effective in improving learner level when carried out over a longer time, and also mentions including areas of metacognition to ensure success.

So, although the research results may be mixed, and it may be asked whether strategy instruction is always effective, I would argue that this could be said about many practices within the classroom (and outside – I could say the same about my weekly Pilates class, but I still go!). It is not always easy to replicate research in the classroom, but the opposite is true as well. Classroom successes cannot always be repeated under more strict conditions, yet personal experience has shown me that not only do students enjoy learning about strategies, but that they feel it gives them more control over their learning, and develops a positive learning environment.

A word on labels

Labels and definitions can be very damaging when used to describe people, and although I try to avoid them in general, sometimes, such as when describing activities that may or may not be suitable to different kinds of learners, they are difficult to avoid, and terms such as ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) have been used. Although these terms are in common use at the time of publication, they may, and hopefully will evolve in the future, especially those that use terms such as "disorder" rather than "difference" for example, and I ask to be excused for any wording used that may seem inappropriate at the time of reading. It is my hope that these activities will be as useful as possible to neurodiverse people as a whole.

My privilege and bias

As a white, cisgender woman teaching in Europe, I understand that some of the activities presented in this book, such as describing ones' workplace reflect this, and I realise that not every learner has access to a personal, dedicated learning space for example. Although the activities are designed to be neutral and relatively low-tech for example, please use your own criteria to determine whether they are suitable for your teaching situation.