LEARN-IN

SUBSÌDIOS PARA PROFESSORES DE INGLÊS

USING TASKS TO DEVELOP LEARNING STRATEGIES

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Samantha Mesojedovas

Associação dos Professores de Língua Inglesa do Estado de São Paulo

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Editor
Jaime Cará Junior

Autor
Samantha Mesojedovas

Conselho editorial
Karen Sillig
Karine Guerra
Wendell Dantas
Merianye Souza
Samantha Mesojedovas
Daniela Alencar

Designer
Jaime Cará Junior

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USING TASKS TO DEVELOP LEARNING STRATEGIES
Samantha Mesojedovas

Abstract: This material presents a brief and general description of what is called learning strategy, mentions its different types, selects a few to be explained in a less generic way, provides examples and invites the reader to reflect on this subject and to come up with his/her own ideas on how to help students develop learning strategies. Ultimately, this work aims at raising the teacher's awareness of how important it is to help students **learn how to learn**. Please note that this material is designed for self-study, but it also fits perfectly peer or group work. It is recommended that you avoid checking the answer key before you get to the end and that you follow the sequence as it is proposed, since the sequences of activities are meant to work more or less inductively.

Key words: Learning strategy, task, problem-solving

INTRODUCTION

First of all, it is very important to state what we mean by learning strategies. However, it is equally important to say that the definition of learning strategies or, more precisely, language learning strategies is highly controversial. So let's start from the latter. It is controversial because of many reasons, but, at the risk of oversimplifying the debate, we will summarize it into two aspects. The first one is basically related to the complex taxonomy implied in the concept of learning strategies. When the term was first introduced to the second language literature, in 1975 (RUBIN, 1975 and STERN, 1975), studies focused on identifying lists of strategies. Then, throughout the decades up to current days, the emphasis moved to classification. Since then, learning strategies have been classified into **direct** or **indirect**, into **cognitive**, **metacognitive** or **social** categories. Obviously, categories would vary according to each researcher understanding of the learning process and of knowledge. And that's precisely the second aspect of the controversy. Different ideas about how people learn and about what knowledge is have a direct impact on the meaning and relevance of learning strategies. Without going into more precise academic conceptualizations, for the sake of this work, we will approach knowledge as something that is socially **constructed** and assume that learning is a process that involves factors related to **reasoning** and **affection**. Despite the controversy, then, we can generically state that learning strategies are a set of means consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of having a more active attitude in relation to their own learning.

Mark the sentence that is true, according to the text:
[ ] It is impossible to define what learning strategy is.
[ ] Defining what learning strategies are has a direct impact on theories of learning and the understanding of what knowledge is.
[ ] Learning strategies have to do with what students choose to do in order to act upon their own learning process.
[ ] Learning-strategy taxonomies have no relevance for the understanding of the main concept.

Reflect upon these questions and keep them in mind while using this material.
▪ What are your ideas about how people learn?
▪ What do you consider knowledge to be?

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Complete the text below, using the expressions from the box.

Learning strategies can be defined as specific actions _____ to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more _____. In other words, language learning strategies are (a) specific means of approaching a _____, (b) modes of operation for achieving a particular end or (c) planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information. Learning a foreign language requires certain mental processes, which might be _____. These processes can be compared to routes of problem-solving. When trying to comprehend and communicate in a foreign language, we are constantly dealing with_____, blurry spots, difficulties, comfort zones, etc. At the same time, our brain is also constantly _____, so that we can learn the language. In the process, our brain will try to elaborate principles or generalizing ideas that can be used as short-cuts in the learning process. These short-cuts can be cognitive, affective, observable, not observable, conscious or unconscious, and they are obviously _____. We have to bear in mind that learning is _____, and so are our strategies. Soon enough, our brain discovers that the logic applied to solve a problem in a given context might not be useful in a different situation. Also, the way we feel in relation to certain people and places might well interfere in the problem-solving and meaning-making processes.

problem or task	not related to cognitive factors only	taken by students	struggling to find its way out of this meaning-making problem
contextual, situated	uncertainty	influenced by a number of factors	transferrable to new situations

Reference:

OXFORD, Rebecca. 1990. **Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know**. New York: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

According to the text that you have just completed, check the alternatives that best describe features of language learning strategies.

[ ] Language learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner.
[ ] They are problem oriented.
[ ] They contribute to the main goal, which is communicative competence.
[ ] They are purely intellectual short-cuts that can optimize learning
[ ] Developing language learning strategies allow learners to become more self-directed.
[ ] They are inner factors and cannot be influenced by any contextual factors
[ ] Language learning strategies support learning both directly and indirectly
[ ] Language learning strategies are not always observable
[ ] Language learning strategies can be conscious
[ ] They involve many types of actions taken by the learner, not just the memorization
[ ] They are a set of ways that students develop to cheat and get the right answer.
[ ] Language learning strategies are developed by more proficient speakers of the language.

THERE ARE LOTS OF STRATEGIES ONE CAN USE

There is a number of learning strategies and, to give you an overview of them, we will refer to the taxonomy that is more widely accepted in the area nowadays.
Strategies are split into direct and indirect, and both categories entail a number of subcategories.

Direct Strategies		
Direct strategies involve the target language directly and require mental processing of the language, but do so differently and for different purposes.		
Memory	**Cognitive**	**Compensation**
▪ Help learners store and retrieve new information. ▪ Reflect simple principles (arranging things in order, making associations and reviewing).	▪ Enable learners to understand and produce new language by different means. ▪ Involve manipulation and transformation of the target language by the learner.	▪ Enable learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limitations in knowledge.

Indirect Strategies		
Indirect strategies support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language.		
Metacognitive	**Affective**	**Social**
▪ Go beyond purely cognitive devices. ▪ Provide ways for learners to coordinate their own learning process.	▪ *Affective* refers to emotions, attitudes, motivations and values. ▪ It is impossible to overstate the importance of these factors influencing language learning. ▪ Help learners gain control over these factors.	▪ Language is a form of social behavior; it is communication – occurs between and among people. ▪ Learning a language involves other people. ▪ Help learners through interaction with others.

About DIRECT strategies, check the INCORRECT alternative.

a) They are related to the student's ability to manipulate the new language.
b) They have to do with memorizing, storing and retrieving information.
c) They are not related to the language itself.
d) They help students compensate for limitations.
e) They help students to understand and to (re)produce the target language.

About INDIRECT strategies, check the INCORRECT alternative.

a) They are related to aspects that are outside the language.
b) They make students reflect about their own learning process.
c) Students' emotions may affect their learning process.
d) They help students develop some social awareness through interaction.
e) They guarantee students will learn the new language.

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES CAN BE DEVELOPED

Developing language learning strategies basically means learning how to enhance the development of communicative competence. It seems to be more likely to develop language learning strategies when students **take action** to deal with the uncertain, the unknown, and the problematic. That is, when students are engaged in problem-solving activities or when are asked to think about what they did to accomplish a given task. It is very important to keep in mind these two assertions: (a) every learner uses strategies to learn, even if they do it unconsciously; and that (b) there's no guarantee that students will develop strategies.

About the first assertion, we clarify that is not "natural" in the sense that it takes no "effort". What most learning theories seem to have in common is that people learn when they're able to make meaning out of their experience. This process of meaning-making is quite complex and it has to do with the person's approach towards his/her context and experience. As we do things and undergo the effects of our doing; or as we respond to events that call us, our mind constructs or adjusts the "ways" or the "means" by which we can make meaning. Many of these "ways" can be considered learning strategies, and their development can be enhanced when we work to improve a specific strategy or to learn a larger variety of them.

As for the second assertion, actually, there is never any guarantee that teaching will result in learning. However, based on our assumption about how people learn, we can increase the chances by promoting what we believe to be the proper conditions for learning to take place. As far as the development of language learning strategies is concerned, such conditions ask for teachers and students to play their role as follows:

Teacher's role:

▪ **Have a balanced concern for communication and accuracy.** Frequently enough, teachers tend to focus on the accurate (re)production of language, mainly at the sentence level, with some degree of disregard for a broader concept of communicative competence. We should bear in mind that communicating is a social practice, so it goes beyond accurate learning of the linguistic code (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.). Focusing on the incorporation of the standard linguistic code might well contribute to the "fossilization" of learning strategies related to **memorization** and hinder the students' development of other types of strategies.

▪ **Promote autonomy and reflection.** The teacher should help students realize that they might well not learn English just by sitting in the classroom, and that they should not rely on the teacher to totally direct their learning. The teacher should provide students with opportunities to think about how they are learning and how they can try to find out what works for them, what doesn't, and what alternatives might be available to enhance their language learning.

Student's role:

▪ **Learn to live with a fair degree of uncertainty.** Student should not get flustered when they do not understand every word, being aware that they should focus on accomplishing the specific objective posed by a given task. With that purpose in mind, they can also think about the best ways to do so, developing strategies.

▪ **Be willing to experiment and take risks.** Students should try out different ways of learning vocabulary until they find the way that suits them best. If students were aware that learning strategies will help them, they might also stop being afraid of making mistakes.

Check the correct sentences, according to the text.

[   ] It is more promising that students will develop learning strategies when they take action to deal with uncertain situations.
[   ] Learners only use strategies to learn consciously.
[   ] Learners will develop learning strategies no matter what.
[   ] Using learning strategies happens spontaneously to every learner.
[   ] Meaning-making processes can be considered learning strategies.
[   ] The development of learning strategies can be increased by the promotion of proper conditions for learning to take place.
[   ] Communication goes beyond accuracy.
[   ] Teachers should focus more on the development of the students' communicative competence instead of focusing on the incorporation of the standard language.
[   ] Students should concentrate on accomplishing a given task rather than getting frustrated when they don't understand every single word.
[   ] Students don't have to take risks when learning a second language.

Reflect about the following questions.
- During your classes, are you more preoccupied with your students' accomplishing through a given task or with their language accuracy?
- What can you do to encourage your students to deal with uncertain situations?
- What can you do to encourage them to take risks when using the target language?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"Unless you know everything, what you need is **to think**." – *Anonymous*

Notes:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

There are 4 different cognitive strategies, basically.

Practicing	Repeating
	Formally practicing sounds and sounds systems
	Recognizing and using formulas and patterns
	(Re)combining
	Practicing naturally

Interpreting meaning	Making meaning out of verbal and non-verbal language
	Using resources for interpreting and negotiating meaning

Analyzing and reasoning	Reasoning deductively
	Analyzing inductively
	Analyzing contrastively across languages
	Translating
	Transferring

Creating structure for input and output	Taking notes
	Summarizing
	Highlighting

Reference:

OXFORD, Rebecca. 1990. **Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know**. New York: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Based on the cognitive strategies above, check the INCORRECT alternative.

[ ] Taking notes, summarizing and highlighting are actions taken by the students which help them take control over their own learning process.
[ ] It is not necessary to provide students with opportunities to develop the most varied number of strategies.
[ ] Strategies related to "practicing" have more to do with the language itself and may develop the students' ability to manipulate the new language.
[ ] "Analyzing and reasoning" help students make connections both in the new language itself and between the new language and their mother tongue.

EXAMPLES OF COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Practicing	Students work in pairs and role play a dialogue that contains language structures taught in class.

Interpreting meaning	Students listen to an audio and should be able to understand what happens based not only on what is being said, but also on other sounds, such as a ringing phone, a ticking clock, or the sound of a shower.

Analyzing and reasoning	Students learn why, in English, we have the same word for "seja bem vindo" and "de nada".

Creating structure for input and output	Students read a given text and should highlight what they consider the most important information.

Consider the activities above. Can you say they guarantee students will develop the corresponding learning strategy? Why (not)?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

DEVELOPING COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Analyze the following activity.

Write the following words on the board.

Boat	Rain	Neat	Team
Meat	Brain	Beat	Plain
Train	Soap	Dream	Toast
Pain	Goat	Pail	Load

Ask your students to repeat each word after you.
Next, ask your students the following questions:

- How many syllables do these words have?
- How many vowels?
- What is the position of the vowels?
- Are both vowels pronounced?

Based on these questions, students should be able to apprehend the rule that *when there are two vowels together in one-syllable, ended in consonant words, the first vowel is fully pronounced while the second one is silent*.

To prepare/deliver this activity, you could watch/show your students the following video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fb3Pdt8kxg .

Which learning strategies are being practiced during the activity?

_____
_____
_____
_____

FURTHER READING

To learn some more about learning strategies, its different types, and other specifics, you can resort to the following **reading suggestions**:

WINGATE, Jim. 2000. **Knowing me, knowing you: classroom activities to develop learning strategies and stimulate conversation**. Quince Cottage, Delta Publishing.

GREGERSEN, Tammy at al. 2001. "Can Foreign Language Learning Strategies Turn Into Crutches?: a pilot study on the use of strategies by successful and unsuccessful language learners". In **Revista Signos, vol. 34, Valparaíso, 2001**. Available at: http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?pid=S0718-09342001004900007&script=sci_arttext. Accessed: 10/14/2013.

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DICTIONARY.COM. Available at: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/strategy>. Accessed: 12/30/2010.

OXFORD, Rebecca. 1990. **Language learning strategies: what every teacher should know**. New York: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Rubin, J. 1975. **What the good language learner can teach us**. TESOL Quarterly, 9/1, 41-51.

Stern, H. H. 1975. **What can we learn from the good language learner?** Canadian Modern Language Review, 34, 304-318.

ANSWER KEY

INTRODUCTION

Mark the sentence that is true, according to the text:

[ ] It is impossible to define what learning strategy is.
[ ] Defining what learning strategies are has a direct impact on theories of learning and the understanding of what knowledge is.
[**X**] Learning strategies have to do with what students choose to do in order to act upon own learning process.
[ ] Learning-strategy taxonomies have no relevance for the understanding of the main concept.

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Complete the text below, using the expressions from the box.

Learning strategies can be defined as specific actions **taken by students** to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more **contextual and situated**. In other words, language learning strategies are (a) specific means of approaching a **problem or task**, (b) modes of operation for achieving a particular end or (c) planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information. Learning a foreign language requires certain mental processes, which might be **transferrable to new situations**. These processes can be compared to routes of problem-solving. When trying to comprehend and communicate in a foreign language, we are constantly dealing with **uncertainty** blurry spots, difficulties, comfort zones, etc. At the same time, our brain is also constantly **struggling to find its way out of this meaning-making problem**, so that we can learn the language. In the process, our brain will try to elaborate principles or generalizing ideas that can be used as short-cuts in the learning process. These short-cuts can be cognitive, affective, observable, not observable, conscious or unconscious, and they are obviously **influenced by a number of factors**. We have to bear in mind that learning is **not related to cognitive factors only**, and neither are our strategies. Soon enough, our brain discovers that the logic applied to solve a problem in a given context might not be useful in a different situation. Also, the way we feel in relation to certain people and places might well interfere in the problem-solving and meaning-making processes.

According to the text that you have just completed, check the alternatives that best describe features of language learning strategies.

[**X**] Language learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner.
[**X**] They are problem oriented.
[**X**] They contribute to the main goal, which is communicative competence.
[ ] They are purely intellectual short-cuts that can optimize learning
[**X**] Learning language learning strategies allow learners to become more self-directed.
[ ] They are inner factors and cannot be influenced by any contextual factors
[**X**] Language learning strategies support learning both directly and indirectly
[**X**] Language learning strategies are not always observable
[**X**] Language learning strategies can be conscious
[**X**] They involve many types of actions taken by the learner, not just the memorization
[ ] They are a set of ways that students develop to cheat and get the right answer.
[ ] Language learning strategies are developed by more proficient speakers of the language.

THERE ARE LOTS OF STRATEGIES ONE CAN USE

About DIRECT strategies, check the INCORRECT alternative.

a) They are related to the student's ability to manipulate the new language.
b) They have to do with memorizing, storing and retrieving information.
c) **They are not related to the language itself.**
d) They help students compensate for limitations.
e) They help students to understand and to (re)produce the target language.

About INDIRECT strategies, check the INCORRECT alternative.

a) They are related to aspects that are outside the language.
b) They make students reflect about their own learning process.
c) Students' emotions may affect their learning process.
d) They help students develop some social awareness through interaction.
e) **They guarantee students will learn the new language.**

LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES CAN BE DEVELOPED

Check the correct sentences, according to the text.

[**X**] It is more promising that students will develop learning strategies when they take action to deal with uncertain situations.
[ ] Learners only use strategies to learn consciously.
[ ] Learners will develop learning strategies no matter what.
[ ] Using learning strategies happens spontaneously to every learner.
[**X**] Meaning-making processes can be considered learning strategies.
[**X**] The development of learning strategies can be increased by the promotion of proper conditions for learning to take place.
[**X**] Communication goes beyond accuracy.
[**X**] Teachers should focus more on the development of the students' communicative competence instead of focusing on the incorporation of the standard language.
[**X**] Students should concentrate on accomplishing a given task rather than getting frustrated when they don't understand every single word.
[ ] Students don't have to take risks when learning a second language.

COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Multiple-choice question to check for the reader's understanding of the different types of cognitive strategies

[ ] Taking notes, summarizing and highlighting are actions taken by the students which help them take control over their own learning process.
[**X**] It is not necessary to provide students with opportunities to develop the most varied number of strategies.
On the contrary; it is the teacher's job to elaborate a class complete enough to encompass activities that help students develop as many strategies as possible.

[ ] Strategies related to "practicing" have more to do with the language itself and may develop the students' ability to manipulate the new language.
[ ] "Analyzing and reasoning" help students make connections both in the new language itself and between the new language and their mother tongue.

EXAMPLES OF COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Consider the activities above. Can you say they guarantee students will develop the corresponding learning strategy? Why (not)?

The development of learning strategies cannot be guaranteed since many different factors are involved in the process. The students' and the teacher's actions are both in the core of this process, as it is being discussed throughout this material.

DEVELOPING COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Which learning strategies are being practiced during the activity?

One single activity could help students develop more than one strategy. On the described activity, the focus is on developing the strategy of **analyzing inductively**, since they should be able to apprehend the grammar rule resorting only to the language itself (sounds). Some other strategies may also be developed, such as repeating, practicing sounds and sounds systems, recognizing patterns and taking notes. It is important to keep in mind that your activities should enable students to develop the most number of learning strategies as possible, so they can take part on their own learning process more actively and more completely.