

# *Implementing Learning Strategy Training in Classroom Teaching in an Chinese Efl Context*

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**Abstract:** Learning strategies can be, and should be taught to language learners to facilitate their learning. The study of learning strategy is not new in China, but the training of it is scant. To help teachers sort out issues before implementing effective strategy instruction, several questions are asked and discussed in this paper: When should strategy training be carried out? Should instruction be separate or integrated, direct or embedded? How to choose appropriate learning strategies for the training program? What frameworks can be followed for strategy instruction?

## **1. Introduction**

According to Oxford (1990), *Learning strategy* is defined as “behaviors or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable”, and the six groups of subcategories he stated are: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social strategies. Strategy training is also called “learner training”, “learn-to-learn training” and “learner methodology training”.

Many researchers believe that learning strategies can be, and should be taught to language learners to facilitate their learning. There has been wealth of research concerning the strategy instruction and its effect on learners' language proficiency through helping them learn to use more powerful and relevant learning strategies. As Cotterall (1993) puts it, Strategy training appears to be a promising means of assisting second language learners.

Nunan(1997) conducted an investigation into the effect of providing opportunities for reflection, self-reporting, and self-monitoring among university students in Hong Kong, and found that “opportunities to reflect on their learning led students to a greater sensitivity to the learning process over time. Students were also able to make greater connections between their English classes, and content courses conducted in English.”

Nunan continued to investigate the effect of strategy instruction on a group of undergraduates at the University of Hong Kong. The experimental group was systematically introduced to some of the key learning strategies underpinning the course. The strategy instruction was incorporated into the regular language teaching program, rather than being taught as a separate component. The results showed that the experimental groups significantly outperformed the control group on measures of motivation, knowledge of strategies, and appreciation of the value of strategies. All groups increased their use of strategies during the course of the semester. Moreover, Nunan found that students did not pay equal attention to the strategies, and a conclusion was drawn: “the greater the

attention, the greater the effect”.

To increase L2 proficiency, some other researchers have provided instruction to their students. According to Oxford(2003), in EFL studies, positive effects of strategy instruction emerged for proficiency in speaking (Kupper & Russo, 1985; Dadour & Robbins 1996) and reading (Park-Oh, 1994), and Cohen and Weaver (1998) found some positive results mixed with neutral findings after they investigated the effects of strategy instruction native-English-speaking learners of foreign languages. McCombs (1988) discovered that learning strategy training can be effective in changing negative self-views and attitudes towards learning.

## **2. Background and Problems**

Even though learning strategy instruction can be beneficial to language learners, in practice it would create great challenges to the teacher in some traditional education contexts, especially when there are few materials designed for strategy instruction and the teaching is supposed to be confined to a certain curriculum set by schools or colleges. Let us take China’s EFL teaching context as an example. Firstly, if learners are expected to practice the strategies being taught, there should be some material designed to teach learning strategies. However, there are few such readily available materials in China, which would make the teacher develop materials as well as carry out the instruction. Second, the set curriculum could be a limit to the instruction. In many schools or colleges, the textbooks are set for the teacher and students, and the teacher and students are supposed to go through almost all the textbook across the whole semester because the content of the final exam will probably be taken from that. So there may be not enough time for the teacher to give students opportunities to practice the strategy being taught with materials the teacher has developed.

The problems mentioned above may be part of the reason why in China, instruction in learning strategies carried out in everyday curriculum is rarely to be seen. There are only a minor proportion of colleges trying to carry out strategy instruction, and the ways of the instruction are only confined to lectures and short-time instruction (Wen, cited in Cohen, 2000: F24). According to a review by Wen Qiufang and Wang Lifei (2004), the study on learning strategies have been existing for two decades since its beginning in 1984. However, not many researches on learning strategy training can be found in China. As Wen and Wang (2004) puts it, there is only one published study focusing on learning strategy training.

In this case, we need more practice in carrying out learning strategy training in Chinese EFL context, and this paper aims at sorting out several issues before strategy instruction can be implemented effectively, to pave the way for the strategy training in Chinese EFL context.

## **3. Issues in Instruction**

### **3.1 When Should Strategy Training Be Carried out?**

O’ Malley and Chamot (2001) argue that in a monolingual setting, learning strategy can be instructed from the beginning because the students can understand what is being taught in their own language. In a second language setting, when beginners are not capable of understanding the language which is associated with language learning strategies, the options are “either to delay introduction of learning strategy instruction until students have developed sufficient proficiency to understand and talk about learning strategies, or provide initial learning strategy instruction in the native language”.

In this case, strategy training can be carried out either to starters in the native language, or to experienced language learners. For instance, it is appropriate to implement strategy training in universities, when students have already acquired sufficient proficiency to understand and talk

about learning strategies. And it is also applicable in junior middle schools to instruct learning strategies in English with certain help of Chinese language.

### **3.2 Should Instruction Be Separate or Integrated, Direct or Embedded?**

O'Malley and Chamot (2001) point out that an unresolved issue in strategy instruction is whether instruction should focus only on learning strategy instruction or should be integrated with classroom instruction in the language or content subject. Jones et al. (1987, cited in O'Malley and Chamot 2001) argues that students will learn strategies better if they can focus on developing strategic processing skills rather than try to learn content at the same time. On the other hand, those in favor of integrated strategy instruction programs argue that learning in context is more effective because practising strategies on authentic language tasks can facilitate the transfer of strategies to similar tasks encountered in other classes (O'Malley & Chamot, 1987, cited in O'Malley and Chamot 2001).

A similar question is whether the actual instruction (separate or integrated) should be direct or embedded. In direct instruction, students are informed of the value and purpose of strategy instruction, while in embedded instruction, the use of the strategies being taught are not informed of the reasons why this approach is being practised in activities or materials.

Through research studies and debates, many researchers like Weinstein and Mayer (1986), Derry and Murphy (1986), recommend that instruction in learning strategies be direct rather than embedded or that direct instruction be added to a curriculum or instructional materials designed with embedded strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 2001). Cohen (2000), Jones et al. (1987) and Nunan (2001) all suggest that being conscious of learning strategies help learners improve and their learning will be more effective.

Moreover, in the Chinese EFL context, the curriculum is decided by the school, and if the teaching schedule does not follow the one planned by the school, students will have trouble in final examinations which are designed according to the school's plan. So integrated strategy instruction is preferable, for the instruction can be integrated into daily class and students' textbooks can be a main source for them to practice learning strategies.

### **3.3 How to Choose Appropriate Learning Strategies for the Training Program?**

There is now evidence to suggest that some of individual learning differences and situational factors, such as learners' beliefs about language learning, learner's age, motivation and personal background, are related to strategy use (Ellis, 1994). Different learners may find different strategies more efficient in their language learning. So there may never be best combination strategies that should be taught.

As is suggested by Oxford (2003), what the teacher should do is to introduce learners to a wide range of good learning strategies in different learning contexts. Oxford (1992/1993 Winter) also suggests that strategy training program had better focus on a "more even balanced of strategies", including all the six categories of the strategies.

### **3.4 What Frameworks to Choose for Strategy Instruction?**

In complementing strategy training, certain frameworks for strategy instruction should be followed.

#### **3.4.1 One Framework for Strategy Instruction is Proposed by Pearson and Dole (1987, Cited in Oxford, 2003), Which Includes the Following Steps.**

- (1) Initial modeling of the strategy by the teacher, with direct explanation of the strategy's use and importance
- (2) Guided practice with the strategy
- (3) Consolidation, where teachers help students identify the strategy and decide when it might be used
- (4) Independent practice with the strategy
- (5) Application of the strategy to new tasks

### 3.4.2 N O'Malley and Chamot's Framework (2001), the Teacher.

- (1) Shows students how to identify their current learning strategies
- (2) Explains the rationale and application for using additional learning strategies
- (3) Provides opportunities and materials for practice
- (4) Evaluates or assists students to evaluate their degree of success with the new learning strategies.

Each of the above frameworks is direct rather than embedded and is designed to raise student awareness of the purpose and rationale of strategy use, give students opportunities to practice the strategies they are being taught, and help them use the strategies in new learning contexts.

In strategy instruction, O'Malley and Chamot point out that students' characteristics such as motivation may play an important role in their ability to acquire learning strategies. There are some students who may be the least motivated to try new strategies, because they are not confident enough that they can learn them successfully. But once these students are encouraged to try to use learning strategies and begin to experience some success, they may gain more confidence, which will increase their motivation in learning and using more strategies. Jones et al. (1987) indicate that strategy instruction should change students' attitudes about their abilities by "teaching them that their failures can be attributed to the lack of effective strategies rather than to the lack of ability or to laziness". Paris (1988a, cited in O'Malley and Chamot, 2001) agrees with this and suggests that a motivational instruction component should be added to learning strategy instruction programs. He identifies four techniques in his motivational and cognitive strategy instruction:

- Modeling, in which the teacher demonstrates to the students how to use the strategy, often by thinking aloud about the goals and mental processes involved
- Direct explanation, in which the teacher provides a persuasive rationale and benefits except from use of strategies, so that students become convinced of their own potential success
- Scaffolding instruction, in which the teacher provides temporary support to students as they try out the new strategies
- Cooperative learning, in which heterogeneous student team work together to solve a problem or complete a task

In Paris' framework, the scaffolding instruction and cooperative learning provide less confident or less efficient students with more support so that they can gradually catch up with others and become more confident about their use of strategies.

## 4. Conclusion

In the context of Chinese EFL teaching, although the study of learning strategy is not new in China, the training of it is scant. To start strategy training, several issues should be considered to ensure the effective implementation of strategy instruction. It seems that instruction in learning strategies should be direct rather than embedded, or direct instruction be added to a curriculum or instructional materials designed with embedded strategies; learners' learning strategies vary

according to their characteristics, so the teacher should consider their individual needs in preparing the strategy instruction and also in instruction itself. Several frameworks of strategy instruction have been presented, and each of them is designed to raise student awareness of the purpose and rationale of strategy use, give students opportunities to practice the strategies they are being taught, and help them use the strategies in new learning contexts.

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